スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❾

イリーズの旅路

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 9

Ileeze's Journey

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
(March 2026)

For more: visit
tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Editors Note: This volume features Wizer Freon from Slayers Revolution

Ileze’s journey (Part 1)

"It’s gone! It’s gooooooooone!"

Early one bright, sunny morning. That scream echoing through the inn was let out by none other than me, **Lina Inverse**.

What was missing was my backpack, which contained all my travel gear, including my travel funds. My short sword and cloak were still there, but to put it simply, everything of value had vanished cleanly. I know for a fact I put it on the table next to the bed before I went to sleep...

It hadn't just fallen off the table. I checked under the table and even under the bed, but the pack was nowhere to be found. Which meant, as I suspected, someone had...

"—No way!?"

A sudden flash of realization hit me, and I dashed out of my room. I turned the doorknob of the room next door. The door swung open with pathetic ease. It hadn't even been locked. As I burst inside—

"...Urgh..."

Faced with exactly the scene I’d imagined, I froze for a second and let out a small groan. Inside the room...

On top of the bed was **Naga**, tied up from head to toe in ropes and gagged, yet somehow sleeping peacefully and snoring away.

And the other bed was completely empty.

Aaaaagh! I knew it!

"Wake up, Naga!"

With that, I launched a flying knee drop that sank right into Naga’s face!

Crr-ack!

After her eyes rolled back into her head for a second, she finally woke up.

"Mmph! Mmm-fgh-mm-mm-mph!"

After a round of muffled complaints, she finally seemed to grasp her situation and looked around frantically.

"This is bad! She gave us the slip again!" I said, pulling the gag out of Naga's mouth.

"What's more, she took my luggage and my money this time! Probably yours too, Naga!"

"...Wha—!?"

Hearing that, she scanned the room.

"It’s true! My luggage is gone! Lina! You mean to tell me you didn't notice at all while your own things were being stolen!?"

"Shut uuuup! Don’t go blaming others when you were sleeping like a baby while gagged! Anyway—"

I used my short sword to slice through the ropes binding her.

"We’re going after her! After Iris!"

I suppose I should explain.

The job Naga and I took on this time was to escort a young girl who had lost both her parents and bring her to the town where her grandfather lived. That was it.

The client was the grandfather. He was quite well-off, and for such a simple job, the reward was substantial. An easy, lucrative job—or so I thought.

Until the girl—**Iris**—started throwing tantrums and saying she "wouldn't go." We managed to persuade her to start the journey, but she clearly hasn't accepted it yet; every so often, she tries to make a break for it on impulse. Yes, just like today.

"Excuse me! Have you seen the girl we were traveling with!?"

I purposely stomped down the stairs and shouted at the innkeeper with a look of feigned panic.

"...Wh-what is it? Why the rush?"

Startled by my intensity (which was just an act), the innkeeper asked back with a puzzled face. Without giving him time to compose himself, I pressed further.

"Just answer me! Every second counts! Where did she go!?"

"...Ah... well... early this morning, she said she was 'going for a walk' and..."

"I knew it!"

I cut him off and raised my voice.

"Blast you, Iris! I won't let you get away!"

"...Wait, what on earth—!?"

Ignoring the innkeeper’s questions, I dashed toward the exit.

"Hmph! To think that girl would run off with our luggage!"

I heard Naga’s voice behind me.

Aaaaagh! Why do you have to go and explain everything, you idiot!?

Sure enough—

"What!? Ran off with the luggage!? Wait a minute! Then what happens to the room bill!?"

"Wait, uh, hold on—!?"

Behind me, the innkeeper’s angry shouting and Naga’s flustered voice grew distant.

...Yep, she got caught. In situations like this, it’s best to just dazzle them with momentum and vanish. If you stop to explain that your money was stolen, that’s what happens. Well, Naga can stay there as a hostage for a bit. Regardless, I have to find the runaway Iris first!

The moment I stepped through the doorway of a dim shop—my eyes locked right with the girl’s.

She looked to be about twelve or thirteen. She had glossy black short hair and round, slightly upturned eyes that reminded me of a cat. She froze instantly, staring right at me.

—Iris.

"Waaa-aaaa-aaaa-aaaa-gh!?"

Kicking over a table covered in orange juice and cake, she bolted toward the back of the shop.

"Like I’d let you get away!"

I grabbed a nearby chair and hurled it at her!

Whizzzz-clonk!

The chair sliced through the air in a straight line and beautifully smacked Iris right on the back of the head, knocking her down.

"You thought you were being clever by doubling back, didn't you? Too bad!"

I ran over and grabbed the collar of her shirt as she tried to get up.

The place I found her was the diner right next to the inn. It sounds stupid at first, but it was actually quite calculated. It seems that after leaving the inn and purposely letting people see her head toward the highway, she doubled back secretly and was relaxing here.

"...You actually found me..." Iris muttered, glaring at me with a hostile look.

"More or less. I was lured toward the highway by people saying they saw you... but then I thought it was strange. If you were really running away, you'd head toward your old home. But the highway I reached leads in the opposite direction. So, I figured it was a trick to make me go the wrong way. Taking the luggage served two purposes: stopping us by taking our money, and making us lose our cool so we couldn't think straight, right?"

"It pays for my living expenses too, so that's three," Iris said shamelessly.

Still... unlocking the inn door, taking all the luggage without me sensing a thing, and this level of calculation... she's a kid with a lot of potential. Well, she's only two or three years younger than me... if she could just do something about her mouth and her personality, she'd be a cute, good girl.

Anyway, she didn't seem like she was going to run again. I let go of her collar and looked her straight in the eyes.

"Why do you keep running away? We talked about going to your grandfather's, and you agreed, didn't you?"

"I did not! You kidnapped me and dragged me this far!"

At Iris's use of the word "kidnapped," the cold stares of the other customers focused on me.

...Ugh... this is bad...

However, acting flustered would only make me look more suspicious. I stood my ground and shouted even louder than Iris.

"Don't say such scandalous things! Who ever kidnapped you!?"

"You did, five days ago! Or what!? You're saying suddenly putting someone to sleep with a spell and carrying them off isn't kidnapping!?"

"It isn't!" I replied instantly and firmly.

"Even if the whole human race says so, I won't! That was 'protection'!"

"Where is the logic in that!?"

"There is! Right here!"

Iris and I glared at each other in silence for a while—

...Phew...

Iris was the first to let out a small breath and look away.

Hah. I win.

"...Well... I know it's no use taking it out on you... it's my old man's fault for telling

you to bring me there in the first place."

She whispered with a strangely mature tone.

"Besides, he ignored me all this time, and now that he's old and getting weak-willed, he wants to take me in and raise me? Talk about selfish!"

"That's why I explained it to you!"

Mr. Coffel—our client and Iris's grandfather—didn't leave her behind because he wanted to.

It was a cliché elopement story. Long ago, Mr. Coffel's only daughter fell in love with a certain man, but Mr. Coffel wouldn't approve. As a result, the two of them vanished together. According to Mr. Coffel himself, it was only after they left that he regretted not forgiving them. He hired people to search everywhere and finally found where they were living, but because he had opposed them so strongly, he didn't know what to do and left them be.

And Iris was the child born to those two.

—However.

About two months ago, Iris's parents passed away in a carriage accident. When Mr. Coffel found out, he decided to take Iris in, and he chose us to act as the mediators and guards.

"Anyway, if he really intended to take me in, shouldn't he have come to get me himself!?"

"...I told you, Mr. Coffel hurt his back and can't travel long distances."

"Whatever."

"...You're so stubborn. Saying things like a child..."

"I *am* a child!"

"Just bear with it."

"No!"

"But why not at least listen to what he has to say? If you can't reach an agreement then, that's that."

"...Hmph..."

Iris groaned, turning away with a dissatisfied expression.

...She's definitely going to try and run away at least two or three more times at this rate...

"—Anyway. First, breakfast. We leave after we eat. Got it?"

In response to my words, Iris kept her dissatisfied face turned away but gave a silent, sharp nod.

By the time we finished breakfast and left the diner, the number of people filling the streets had increased considerably. From here to the town of Mercado, where Mr. Coffel was waiting, was a two or three-day journey.

—Provided, of course, that adults were walking at a steady pace.

"...For a small village, there sure are a lot of people passing through. But don't think you can escape by disappearing into this crowd."

As I said that to Iris—

...Wait...?

She had been right beside me just a moment ago, but she was already gone.

Dammit! She runs off the second I tell her not to!

But she couldn't have gone far. I looked around frantically and—

"Aggh!?"

"Hey! You're my bodyguard, aren't you!?"

Overlapping a man's groan, I heard Iris's voice. Looking toward the sound, I saw Iris running toward me through the crowd, followed by four or five men. Sensing trouble, the people around us cleared a path.

"These guys! They suddenly tried to snatch me! I kicked them and ran!"

Iris ran up to my side and pointed at the men.

"I see..."

I sent a sharp gaze toward the four men who had stopped a short distance away. Their clothes were like ordinary villagers, but their eyes and demeanor were those of thugs.

There are people in this world who kidnap children to sell them to slave traders, but these guys seemed a bit different. If that were the case, they would have fled the moment it became a scene. That means—they're targeting Iris specifically!?

Regardless, the quickest way to find out the circumstances was to squeeze the info out of them.

"...It seems you're after this girl... but what exactly is your goal!?"

In response to my question, the men silently drew daggers from their cloaks.

Fine. If that's how it's going to be.

I began chanting a spell. Simultaneously, the men charged! I drew the short sword at my waist and swung it down at the one in the lead. The man easily dodged to his

left—

Thwack!

In that instant, the right kick I'd launched sank deep into the man's solar plexus. The strike from above was just a feint. I'd purposely made him dodge into the kick. Using the momentum from the kick, I jumped back lightly and released the spell I'd finished!

"Burst Rondo!"

K-boom-boom-boom-boom!

Nearly twenty light orbs generated around me struck the oncoming men, bursting into flames!

"Gwaaaah!?"

The cries of the men and the murmurs of the gallery overlapped.

...A stray shot might have gone near Iris or the onlookers, but while this spell looks flashy, its lethality is almost zero. Of course, it's impossible to knock the men out with this either. Even a direct hit would only cause a minor burn. It was just a diversion and a warning. During this gap, I started my next chant.

But!

"...Damn you...!"

Ripping through the lingering smoke, one of the men resumed his charge. He recovered faster than I expected! He wasn't aiming for me—he was aiming for Iris!

The man spread his arms wide to snatch the girl. Iris, perhaps frozen with fear, stood still—

—No!

Wham!

In the next moment, Iris launched a magnificent upward kick that caught the man squarely under the chin!

Whoa!? She's pretty good!

That was a perfect counter. Unable to withstand it, the man flipped onto his back. The remaining guys stood there stunned for a moment.

"...Y-you brat! In that case!"

Whether they had guts or were just stupid, they charged again with a roar.

Hah. Fools. My spell is already complete!

"Freeze Arrow!"

Over a dozen arrows of cold air struck the charging men! Some had their feet frozen to the ground, others took the cold to their sides, and they collapsed on the spot.

Easy.

Just as I thought that—

Dash!

Pushing through the crowd of onlookers, one man bolted out! He was heading straight for Iris!

There was one more!?

The man raised his dagger toward the girl, who stood frozen at the suddenness of it!

—No way—is he going to kill her!?

I don't have time for a spell! Even if I dash over—

"Freeze Arrow!"

But at that moment! A flight of cold arrows flew in and knocked the knife-wielding man flat!

—That spell just now!

"Naga!"

Calling her name, I turned around to see Naga standing tall on the roof of a nearby building, with laundry fluttering in the wind behind her. She was wearing an apron and a headscarf.

"...What... is with that outfit...?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! What a silly question, Lina Inverse! Since you never came back, it’s obvious I’ve been forced into manual labor by the innkeeper!"

...Oh. Come to think of it, I’d completely forgotten about her.

"Anyway, you saved us! Naga! Thanks!"

"Hmph! No need for thanks!... More importantly, please, the inn bill, quickly..."

Yikes. She's really suffering.

"Got it!"

As I gave my quick reply, Iris clung tightly to my right arm. I could feel her body trembling slightly. It’s no wonder. Being faced with a dagger and sheer murderous intent is enough to terrify a grown adult, unless they're used to combat.

"...Are you okay, Iris?"

"...Yeah..."

"You did great. I’m impressed."

"...Well... my mom taught me all sorts of things."

"All sorts of things?"

As I asked with a frown, Iris gave a small smile.

"Yeah. Like how to fight. Mom always used to say, 'Do them before they do you' or 'Don't worry about being fair when taking down an enemy.'"

...What... kind of education was she getting...?

What kind of person was Iris's mother...?

Well, regardless...

I walked up to one of the men pinned to the ground by the Freeze Arrows and glared at him.

"...Now... suppose you tell me. Why were you targeting Iris?"

"...Hah...! Do you really think I'll just talk because you asked!?"

"Of course—I don't."

Faced with the man’s bravado despite his pale face, I flashed a meaningful, grinning smile.

"But you know, if you don't talk, it’s going to be a lot worse than a little frostbite."

With that, I whispered a small spell under my breath. A small sphere of light appeared in my raised right palm.

"...Wh-!? What is that!?"

To the panicked man, I gave a silent smile and slowly brought my right hand toward his face.

"What are you going to do!? Hey!?"

Ignoring his question, I slowly moved the light closer to him.

...Anyone with even a little knowledge of magic would have known. What was in my right hand was just a simple "Lighting" spell orb. If it hit him, it would at most dazzle his eyes, but to a man who didn't know its identity, it was terrifying.

"W... wait! Wait a minute!"

At the man’s near-scream, I stopped my hand.

"—Ready to talk?"

"Yeah! We were hired! To catch that kid and sell her off, or finish her—"

Suddenly, a surge of murderous intent cut off the man’s words!

—Behind me!?

The moment I thought it, I scooped up Iris and leaped to the side!

K-BOOOM!

A stray explosion spell struck the attackers and the onlookers directly!

"—I think that’s enough talking for now."

A clear, young man’s voice came from the same direction as the murderous intent.

On the green gabled roof of a nearby house stood a single dark figure. It was a man who looked like a mage, wrapped in a black cloak with his face hidden by a hood. He was staring straight at me and Iris.

"—That last strike was held back. I don't think they'll die. ...It seems you are also a mage, just like me. Well, for today, I’ll withdraw out of respect for your fighting spirit, but next time we meet, I’ll be a bit more serious. —Be prepared—"

The moment the mage said that.

"What do you mean, 'be prepared'!?"

Whack!

A stone thrown by an enraged "Villager A" struck the mage squarely in the crotch!

"G-wuk!? Nwa-gh-gh-gh!"

His eyes rolled back, he lost his balance, and he slid right off the roof!

Slide-slide-slide-slide! Thud!

Enraged villagers swarmed him instantly!

"You bastard! That was dangerous!"

"You fired a spell like that in the middle of the village!"

"My brand-new clothes are torn!"

"That hurt, you jerk!"

"Beat him! Beat him!"

"Kyaaaaaagh! Help! Help me pleeeease!"

—And so.

Before we even learned his name, the mysterious mage was easily defeated by the hands of the angry villagers.

"...Uuugh... actually, I was also... asked by a certain person..."

Inside the cell at the village office, the mysterious mage—now bruised and battered by the villagers—spoke to me with tears in his swollen eyes.

His arrogant attitude from before was nowhere to be seen. The moment he was beaten, he became incredibly humble. ...Well, I suppose humans are generally like that.

"I see. And? Who was this 'certain person'?"

As I questioned him in the presence of an official, the mysterious mage said tearfully,

"I don't knoooooow! It’s true! Believe me! It was a middle-aged man who didn't give his name, asking if I wanted to make some money... He said I didn't have to kill the kid, just sell her to a slaver. He gave me a bunch of gold coins as an advance... so I just... went along with it... I’m so sorryyyyy!"

As the mage crumpled into tears, the official looked at me with a troubled face.

"...Hmm... he says this, but do you have any idea who it might be?"

Iris and I exchanged a brief glance.

"...We... don't know yet. I’m in the middle of taking this girl to her grandfather..."

"I see..."

The official thought for a moment.

"I hate to ask something so blunt... but is that grandfather perhaps quite wealthy?"

"Yes—from what I saw, very."

"...I see..."

The official grimaced. It seemed he was thinking the same thing I was.

Namely—a dispute over inheritance. A wealthy old man is calling for his granddaughter, who had been living away until now. That means if something were to happen to the old man, a large portion of the inheritance would likely go to the granddaughter who suddenly appeared—in other words, Iris. Naturally, there would be relatives who wouldn't be happy about that. One of those relatives must have tried to "dispose" of Iris...

I couldn't say it out loud in front of her, though.

"...Whatever the case, it’ll be clear once we get to the old man’s place," Iris said quietly.

A look of determination flickered in the depths of her eyes.

"I’m going. To the old man's."

"Iris!?"

"Mom always said: 'Show those who oppose you a living hell.'"

"....."

"I don't know what they’re planning, but I can't just turn my back and run from someone who targeted me! Since it’s come to this, I’m going there myself and crushing them!"

"...This girl... what on earth...?" the official muttered, stunned by Iris’s fiery declaration.

She turned to me and gripped my right hand.

"Will you help me, Lina-neechann!?"

"Okay, Iris."

In response to my wink, Iris replied with a brilliant smile.

—And then—

It was three days later when Iris and I arrived in the town of Mercado, where Mr. Coffel was waiting. Since that day, Iris hadn't even made a gesture toward running away, and the journey had proceeded smoothly.

No more assassins were sent. But that didn't mean whoever was targeting Iris had given up. They likely intended to settle things here. In this town of Mercado.

In terms of transportation, it wasn't in a particularly convenient location, but there was a gemstone mine nearby, and the town had flourished because of it. In other words, it was a town of miners and gemstone nouveau riche.

In the middle of all that, Iris’s grandfather, Mr. Coffel, was a man who had started a business in this town and succeeded. Near the center of town—in a district lined with mansions—stood an especially elegant stone house.

"This is Mr. Coffel’s house."

"....."

At my words, Iris stood there dazed for a moment.

"...It feels like... a dozen of the houses I used to live in could fit in here..."

"There’s a backyard too, so maybe two dozen?"

"...I don't know why, but I'm starting to get annoyed. Just because."

Iris muttered with a sullen expression.

"I get it. When you see someone who’s unnecessarily rich, it just makes you kind of mad. That’s just the natural way a human should be."

"...Is it?"

"It is. Well, anyway, staring at the house won't do anything. Let’s go."

"Ugh... yeah..."

"Hey, hey. Don't go getting intimidated just by looking at the house. The real show starts now."

"...Th-that's true."

She took two or three deep breaths. Her resolve seemed to settle, and she gave a big nod.

"Alright! Let’s go, Lina-neechan!"

"Alright! Let’s go!"

We passed under the marble arch, walked along the long approach paved with white stones, and knocked on the dragon-head door knocker a few times.

—After a short wait.

Click.

Peeking out from the gap of the outward-opening door was a middle-aged man with gray hair. He was thin and lanky, with an unhealthy complexion, but his eyes shone with a strangely sharp light. Of course, it wasn't Mr. Coffel. It was a face I didn't know.

"...Yes?"

In response to the man’s question, I pointed toward Iris.

"I’m Lina Inverse. Mr. Coffel asked me to bring his granddaughter."

"...Oh... so this girl is..."

The man muttered, casting a quiet gaze toward Iris.

"Is Mr. Coffel in?"

"Yes. —Come in."

The man opened the door. Iris and I entered as invited. Pushing along Iris, who was distracted by the furnishings and chandeliers in the entrance hall, I followed the man.

"By the way... who are you?"

"Me? I’m Hubble. Coffel’s nephew. I didn't see you when you came before, but I’ve

heard about you from my uncle."

He replied without even turning around as he walked.

"...A nephew... I see... hmmm..."

I tried saying that in a meaningful tone.

"Something wrong?"

He asked back, but his expression showed no sign of agitation.

"No. Nothing."

Just because he was a middle-aged relative of Mr. Coffel didn't mean he was the culprit behind the attack on Iris. However, there was no doubt he was one of the suspects. The place he led us to was a drawing room.

"Wait here. I'll go call him."

With that, Hubble closed the door and left the room.

"Wow—this sofa is so soft!"

Iris let out an innocent voice as she sank into the plush sofa. And after waiting a bit... the sound of the doorknob turning.

Iris stood up instinctively. I also stood up—

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

As if being supported by Hubble—perhaps his back still wasn't better—an old man entered the room. Small in stature with white hair and a white beard. He looked like a very kind old gentleman. This was Mr. Coffel. The client for this job—and Iris's grandfather.

"You've gone to a lot of trouble, Miss Lina..."

Mr. Coffel's words froze in his throat. The old man stood there aghast, his gaze fixed on Iris.

"...This child is...!"

"Yes. This child is..."

My words were cut off by Mr. Coffel's voice.

"This child... isn't Iris!"

"WHAT THE HEEEEEEEEEELL!?"

The shocked cries of me, Iris, and Hubble echoed through the room!

(The Journey of Iris: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

A mysterious figure targeting Ileze! And what is the true meaning behind Elder Coffel’s words!?

What is the fate of Lina, Ileze, and Naga—who, at first glance, seems to have been forgotten even by the author!?

All truths will now be revealed with the town of Mercado as the stage!

Next time: "Iris’s Journey: Part 2." To be continued!

Ileze’s Journey (Part 2)

Synopsis

I took a job to deliver Ileze, a girl who lost her parents, to a wealthy old man—it was supposed to be a simple, straightforward task. However, everything changed the moment a mysterious group targeting Ileze's life appeared!

Although we defeated the assassins, we reached the town of Mercado, where Ileze’s grandfather, Mr. Coffel, was waiting, without ever discovering who was pulling the strings. Waiting there were Mr. Coffel’s nephew, Hubble, and an unexpected remark from Mr. Coffel himself—namely: "This child isn't Ileze."

It was Mr. Coffel who finally broke the silence born of sheer astonishment.

“—Just kidding. Psych!”

“……You……!”

“““Are you an idiot!?!?”””

Thwack-thud-crack!

A triple kick from Ileze, Hubble, and me struck the old man squarely!

“What were you thinking!? Cracking such a senseless joke out of nowhere!”

“She’s right! No matter how you look at it, that was in incredibly poor taste!”

Despite the fury with which Hubble and I pressed him, Mr. Coffel somehow wore a happy smile.

“……Mm-hmm…… Ileze’s strike just now was exactly like my daughter’s kick. Like mother, like daughter, indeed……”

“Gaaah! Why are you acting all sentimental and happy about that!? You’ve completely lost Ileze’s trust now!”

“……Well, you see…… she’s my granddaughter and we've only just met…… I thought I’d crack a light joke to clear the tension in the air……”

““That makes it even more tense!!””

Hubble and I snapped at him again. Ileze let out a deep sigh.

“……I knew it…… maybe it was a mistake for me to come here……”

“If you’re going back to that other house, I won’t stop you, Ileze.”

“Hwah-wah-wah! Wait a second! I was wrong just now!”

As Mr. Coffel hurriedly apologized, Ileze shot him a cold, sharp look.

“……I don’t suppose…… the reason you opposed my Papa and Mama’s marriage was also a ‘joke,’ and they eloped before you could say ‘Psych!,’ was it?”

“*Gasp!*”

“……I definitely think I'm going back to the other house.”

“Uwah-wah! Wait, Ileze! That ‘gasp’ just now was also a joke! Believe me!”

Clinging to Ileze with the desperate energy of a husband whose wife is about to leave him, Mr. Coffel pleaded. Based on his behavior so far, I think asking someone to "believe" him is asking too much. Ileze sighed again and glanced toward me.

“……Fine, whatever…… By the way, the truth is, while I was traveling to get here, it seemed like someone was targeting me.”

“—Targeting you?”

At these words from Ileze, Hubble’s face turned serious.

“They were definitely after Ileze,” I interjected from the side. “I knocked those thugs around and captured them—according to them, it seems they were asked by someone to ‘deal’ with Ileze.”

“What!? By who, exactly!?”

“That—I don’t know.”

I had heard from the testimony of a mysterious sorcerer (who was caught quite easily after appearing) that it was a middle-aged man, but I decided not to mention that for now.

“Why Ileze?”

To Hubble’s question, I shook my head left and right.

“Who knows…… but what’s certain is that unless we somehow track down the mastermind behind the attack on Ileze, she’ll remain in danger.”

“……Hmm…… I had no idea things had come to that……”

Mr. Coffel fell silent for a moment, eventually turning a quiet gaze toward me.

“—Lina-dono. If you are willing, would you stay here a little longer and protect Ileze? If people like that come to attack her again, we won't be able to do anything. —Of course, for that portion, I will compensate you separately from the previous arrangement. What do you say?”

From the start, I had no intention of abandoning Ileze here. If a new commission fee was involved, all the better.

“—Understood. Please, leave it to me.”

Saying that, I gave a firm nod.

“—By the way, absolutely nothing is happening. Miss Sorceress?”

Hubble spoke to me in a sarcastic tone on the fifth night after Ileze and I had arrived in town—during dinner.

—It was true. Since the two of us arrived in Mercado, the group targeting Ileze hadn't shown their faces at all.

“Well, now, but isn't it best that nothing has happened?”

“No!”

Stabbing a fork into a fried small fish with a *thwack*, Ileze rejected Mr. Coffel’s peace-at-any-price sentiment.

“Once they’ve targeted me, I can't let them get away with it! My Mom always said: return a favor by half, return a grudge twofold!”

Mm-hmm. That’s a rather admirable educational policy. But Hubble, his gaze still fixed on me, continued.

“—However, in reality, nothing has happened since Ileze arrived in this town. Does this group targeting Ileze even exist in the first place?”

“……What do you mean, Hubble?”

Asked by Mr. Coffel, Hubble turned a meaningful look toward me.

“Isn’t it a common story? Someone, somewhere, wants to make some easy money, so they hire thugs to attack Ileze once, then they step in later to take on the job of guarding her.”

“……So, you’re saying that ‘someone, somewhere’ is me.”

“I happen to dislike those called sorcerers. I have no idea what goes through their minds.”

Hubble said this while nonchalantly sipping his brown stew. However, if I lost my temper here, I’d lose. I maintained a calm face as best I could.

“But there’s also this. Someone hints to everyone else that a specific person is the ‘culprit’ to hide the fact that they are the culprit themselves. Plus, if the person they frame happens to be the guard, they get rid of a nuisance—killing two birds with one

stone.”

If the culprit's goal was Mr. Coffel’s fortune, as I suspected, then the most suspicious person was none other than this Hubble. At my words, his mouth twitched slightly, but he spoke with a composed tone.

“Hoho—that is quite an interesting opinion.”

For a moment, sparks flew fiercely between Hubble and me—

“That’s enough, both of you.”

It was Mr. Coffel’s exasperated voice that shattered the tense atmosphere.

“It won't do any good to fight amongst ourselves. ……Well, of course, it's true we can't keep Lina-dono here forever…… If those thugs who attacked Ileze know something, it's the officials' job to get it out of them. —That’s right. Tomorrow, I’ll send a messenger to the village where they’re being held and see if they’ve found out anything.”

……Hmm…… certainly, in the current situation, that was about all we could do. The fastest way would be to bring that sorcerer, who said he was hired by the mastermind-like man, and have him identify the suspects, but I didn’t think the authorities would move so quickly even if we requested it. That incident where Ileze was attacked was a big deal to us, but in the eyes of the officials, it was just another "attempted kidnapping." In that case, we’d just have to wait patiently for the other side to move……

Just as I was thinking that while moving my knife and fork—

BOOM!

Along with an explosion that shook the area, the world outside the window was dyed the color of flames!

“—What!?”

As Hubble shouted and stood up from his chair, I was already running toward the window while chanting a spell. That was unmistakably a strike from an offensive spell. After sensing the presence outside, I flung the window wide. One of the garden trees was rising in red flames like a giant torch. It had likely taken a direct hit from a *Fireball* or something similar. Scanning the area, I saw a black silhouette flash against the dark blue night sky near the wall across the garden.

“*Freeze Brid!*”

For now, I used the spell I had been chanting to extinguish the burning tree.

“Everyone! Don’t move from there!”

Leaving the others in the room with those words, I jumped out the window while chanting another spell.

—Of course, I was well aware that the *Fireball* just now and that silhouette were merely a diversion. They likely planned to attack Ileze and the others once I moved away from them. Even knowing that, the reason I deliberately took the bait was to bring this to a quick conclusion. If I ignored the diversion and stayed by Ileze's side, the raiding party probably wouldn't move. In that case, we wouldn't find any clues to the mastermind, and the fight would drag on.

To avoid that, I had to leave the house, knock out the diversionary opponent quickly, return immediately, crush the raiding party, and make them spit out the mastermind's identity! I also had a hunch that the raiding party wouldn't launch an utterly reckless attack. If the goal was simply to kill Ileze, they could have launched that *Fireball* directly into the room instead of at a garden tree. The fact they didn't suggested there was someone in that room at the time who the attackers couldn't afford to get caught in the blast.

—Probably—Hubble.

In any case, everything would become clear once I dealt with the opponent in front of me. By the time I crossed the needlessly large garden and reached the wall, the black silhouette had already vanished. However, if the goal was a diversion, they wouldn't have disappeared completely.

"*Ray Wing!*"

I used the high-speed flight spell I had prepared to fly up onto the wall. Just as I expected—

I saw the figure running away down a street a short distance from the mansion, as if telling me to follow. Fine! Then I'll do exactly as you wish! Wrapped in a barrier of wind, I sped through the air toward them! The distance between me and the shadow closed in an instant. However, realizing I was there, the shadow hurriedly turned into a narrow side alley.

—Damn it. So that's how it is.

This *Ray Wing* can reach considerable speeds, but the control is difficult, and it naturally lacks a tight turning radius. If they move nimbly through narrow alleys, I can't keep up with the movements, and even if I try to track from above, it's nearly impossible to follow a silhouette in a dark alley in this darkness. Resigned, I cancelled the spell and chased after the shadow on foot. Judging by the silhouette, the opponent seemed to be wearing a mantle. I didn't know if they were a sorcerer or just someone who didn't want to show their face. Regardless, I had no intention of playing tag forever. I had to knock this person out and get back to Ileze and the others.

Chanting a spell under my breath—

"*Freeze Arrow!*"

The spell that was released, however, was not the one I had cast. Simultaneously with

the voice, a dozen arrows of cold air rained down on me from above!

The trails shimmering in the faint moonlight shattered against the earth, scattering cold mist. Whether it was luck or because they weren't aiming for me, not a single shot hit.

—But—that voice!

Looking up at the night sky, I saw a black shadow standing on the roof of a nearby building with the moonlight at its back!

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It’s been quite a while, Lina Inverse!”

“Naga! You’re alive!?”

“As if I’d die! Just because I was made to do housework at an inn! ……Oh yes, I had to thank you for that. How dare you abandon me back then and run away with just Ileze! I suppose your scheme was to pocket the guard fee all by yourself, but I won’t let that happen!”

“'Won't let that happen,' fine, but did you actually work off your room and board? By any chance?”

“Hmph! Thanks to a kind person who covered my bill, I was finally released!”

“……A kind person……?”

I frowned slightly at Naga’s words. To think such a charitable creature as a "kind person" still survived in this world…… Usually, those kinds of people have some sort of ulterior motive……

“That kind person asked me to stall the opponent who was lured out here, and that’s that!”

……Isn’t that…… just being blatantly used……?

“Hmph! I never imagined that opponent would be you, Lina! But this is perfect! I’ll pay back the debt from that time right here!”

Wailing one-sidedly, Naga began chanting a spell.

“……Wait…… hold on, Naga!?”

There wasn't even time for a voice of protest.

“*Freeze Brid!*”

Naga released the next spell without hesitation! I hurriedly jumped out of the way. A mass of cold air struck the spot where I had been standing just moments ago.

Sigh! Talking to Naga is impossible after all! In that case, I have to shut her up by force! I began chanting a spell—

Then I suddenly snapped back to my senses. That’s right! This wasn't the time to be having a spell battle with Naga! I noticed the silhouette I had been chasing was already long gone. In that case, I had to return to Ileze’s side as quickly as possible, but the problem was how to shake off Naga. Persuasion was useless, obviously. On the other hand, if I engaged in a full-blown exchange of spells, the fight would likely drag on.

Which left only one method—

“Stop!”

I raised my voice toward Naga, who was standing on the roof.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to play with you here! If you still intend to fight, I have an idea of my own!”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! That’s a poor bluff! If you have an idea, let’s hear you say it!”

As she stood there with her chest puffed out, I muttered under my breath.

“……I’ll burn your luggage.”

—Needless to say, Naga apologized immediately after those words.

“—So? This ‘kind person’ who covered your inn bill, what kind of guy was he?”

I asked Naga as we walked toward Mr. Coffel’s house.

“He was a young man, looked like a sorcerer. He said he’d pay the bill if I lent him a little help.”

A young man who looked like a sorcerer?

“Could that be…… the sorcerer who appeared before me and Ileze!?”

“Which sorcerer?”

“I told you! When Ileze was attacked by thugs, you provided cover with your spells, didn’t you!? There was a sorcerer who appeared before us after that, wasn't there!?”

“Hmph. If that's the case, I don’t remember.”

As always, Naga spoke while needlessly puffing out her chest.

“I was too absorbed in the laundry right after that.”

……She’s surprisingly domestic, or maybe just diligent…… well, whatever……

“But if someone says ‘I’ll pay your bill, so stall this person,’ usually, you’d be a little suspicious.”

“Hmph. If you stop believing in people, it’s all over.”

No, that's not what I meant…… well…… asking Naga to think before she acts might be impossible. I let out a sigh and pointed toward Mr. Coffel's house ahead.

"—There it is. Mr. Coffel's house. I'm going on ahead."

Saying that, I didn't wait for an answer and chanted the *Ray Wing* spell. Flying over the wall in one breath, I landed in the garden. Even though I'd had a bit of a comedic exchange with Naga, not much time should have passed since I jumped out. There were no signs of a commotion at the mansion. I breathed a sigh of relief and approached the window I had left open.

—Wait? At that moment, I suddenly noticed something. I had certainly left this window wide open when I went out. But knowing that someone was targeting Ileze nearby, normally someone would have closed it. Yet, the window remained open. Which meant—

"Ileze! Everyone!"

I hurriedly rushed to the window—

Inside the brightly lit room, Mr. Coffel and Hubble were both lying on the floor, and Ileze was nowhere to be seen.

"Mr. Coffel! Mr. Coffel!"

I pulled him up. He wasn't dead. He was simply asleep. Did they use a *Sleeping* spell!? In that case, finding Ileze was a higher priority than the two of them. —But which way did the person who kidnapped Ileze run!? Just then—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! That's far enough!"

Naga's voice came from far behind, from the other side of the wall.

"—What……!? What do you think you're doing!?"

The voice that followed immediately after was a young man's voice. —I definitely know this voice—!

I used my magic again and went over the wall for the third time. There stood Naga, standing tall with her chest puffed out, facing a figure in a mantle. It was the person I had been chasing at first. He had Naga stall me while he returned to the mansion and kidnapped Ileze. Since I returned faster than he expected, he probably tried to hide and wait it out, only to run into Naga as he tried to flee again—that was likely it.

"—What do you think you're doing!? Have you forgotten the favor I did by paying your bill!?"

Naga remained unmoved by the mantle-clad figure's petty guilt-tripping.

"Hmph! Don't make me laugh! Stalling someone is one thing, but do you think I'd be an accomplice to kidnapping a child for that measly amount!?"

“That’s exactly right! Give it up!”

The mantle-clad figure turned around at my voice from behind.

“—You, I knew it!”

I accidentally raised my voice. There was a reason his voice sounded familiar. It was that unnamed sorcerer who had appeared before me and Ileze before, only to be easily defeated by the villagers. I thought for sure he was still captured…… whether he escaped or was released, he was still stubbornly targeting Ileze. Ileze was held in the sorcerer's arms, breathing quietly in her sleep.

“……Tch!”

The sorcerer clicked his tongue and suddenly threw Ileze right at me!

“Uwah-wah-wah-wah-wah!?”

Shouting, I scrambled to catch her. At the same time, the sorcerer began chanting a spell. This—*Flare Arrow*!? This is bad! To be honest, even for me, I didn't have the confidence to dodge a dozen falling fire arrows while holding the unconscious Ileze! I hurriedly began chanting the *Dame Wing* spell. I planned to aim for the moment he fired the *Flare Arrow* and blow them away with a strong wind. But—won't the spell be in time!?

Just as I predicted, the sorcerer’s spell was completed slightly faster than mine! But, just before the sorcerer could release the ‘Words of Power’!

“Hey, you two! Have you completely forgotten about me!?”

At Naga’s voice from behind, the sorcerer reflexively turned around. Now! I set Ileze down on the ground and dashed toward the sorcerer! By the time he turned back toward me, my spell was already finished!

“*Diem Wing!*”

WHOOSH!

Hit head-on by the powerful wind, the sorcerer reclined back significantly. By the time he regained his posture, I had already dove into his personal space.

Thwack!

My elbow strike landed squarely on his jaw! He flipped over backward and his eyes rolled up into his head. —All right. Now I just have to drag him to the mansion and make him confess in front of everyone, and that will be the end of it. But before that, I have to wake Ileze and the others up……

“Naga, I’ll ask just in case, but do you happen to know a spell to wake someone who’s under a *Sleeping* spell?”

“I do. I just have to wake Ileze, right?”

She said this nonchalantly and began chanting under her breath. ……This girl…… she knows some strange spells sometimes. Eventually, under Naga's spell, Ileze slowly opened her eyes.

"……Huh……?"

Not quite understanding the situation, she looked around blankly, then her gaze stopped on the fallen sorcerer.

"……Ah! This guy! The sorcerer from before! Was he still after me!?"

"Seems so. Anyway, we're dragging him back to everyone, and now we're going to make everything clear!"

The cast was all there. The sorcerer, still unconscious from my blow, Ileze, Mr. Coffel, Hubble, and then Naga and me.

"……First, we have to wake those two up…… Naga, if you please."

"Hmph! Leave it to me!"

Naga nodded at my words and once again chanted that spell I didn't know. Eventually, Mr. Coffel and Hubble both let out small groans and slowly sat up.

"……Nn…… we are……"

"……What on earth……?"

"We caught the person targeting Ileze."

I spoke to the two, who were still muttering blankly as their consciousness cleared.

"Now, if we question this guy and make him confess who the mastermind is, the case is over."

I shifted my gaze to the sorcerer, and the two followed suit—

""Assam!?""

Surprised voices burst from both their mouths simultaneously. ……Eh……?

"……Um…… someone you know……?"

"Someone I know? ……He's my son."

Hubble answered my question with a bitter face.

"……Eeeeeeeeeeehhhhhh!?"

To think he was a full-fledged family member, when I thought he was just Assassin #1!? No, wait, could it be that the story about being 'asked by a middle-aged man' was a lie, and he himself was the mastermind!?

“He wouldn't listen to me, said he wanted to be a sorcerer, and ran away from home several years ago…… and after all that, this!?”

“……By any chance…… is that why you hate sorcerers?”

“No. I’ve always hated sorcerers.”

“……Ah…… I see……”

“In any case, why would he……”

Muttering, Hubble stepped toward Assam—At that moment!

Dash!

Assam, who I thought was unconscious, suddenly sat up, dashed forward, and grabbed Mr. Coffel in a chokehold!

“……What……!?”

“Assam!?”

“Don’t move!”

At Assam’s shout, everyone in the room froze.

“……Wha…… what are you planning……!?”

Mr. Coffel asked in a pained voice while being held from behind. Assam wore a cold smile.

“……Hmph…… that’s my line! I heard there was a family member who left the house, but to think you’d call her back now! When I heard the news while traveling, I doubted my ears. I have no intention of sharing the inheritance with someone who left the house once and then comes crawling back.”

“Aren't you also someone who left the house?”

“I’m different.”

I don’t know what basis he had, but Assam stated this with total confidence. One of those "I’m special" types you find everywhere.

“So? For the sake of Mr. Coffel’s fortune, you were going to ‘deal’ with Ileze? When you were caught, was that bit about being ‘asked by a middle-aged man’ perhaps an attempt to pin the crime on your own father?”

“What!?”

Hubble’s face was filled with shock at my words. In fact, I had taken Assam’s words at face value and suspected Hubble. But thinking about it, if Ileze vanished and Hubble was blamed for the crime, all of Mr. Coffel’s fortune would go to Assam.

“……Sorcery research requires funds, you see…… In the first place, if Dad and Grandpa

hadn't opposed me becoming a sorcerer, it wouldn't have come to this.”

That was Assam’s answer. ……This guy……

“—That’s unforgivable—”

The person who spoke and took a step forward was neither Naga nor me.

“……Ileze!? Don’t come closer!”

Ignoring Mr. Coffel’s warning, Ileze slowly walked toward the two.

“A grown-up your age doing bad things to family over something so stupid? If my Mom were alive, you’d be half-dead by now.”

“Shut up! Don’t come closer!”

“Someone who gets scared of a kid like me shouldn't talk so big.”

“……What……!?”

Assam’s face flushed with anger at Ileze’s words.

“Who’s scared of someone like you! Fine, I’ll take you as a hostage instead of the old man!”

As he said this, he shoved Mr. Coffel aside and dashed toward Ileze! But the moment Assam reached her, Ileze suddenly dropped her body.

To Assam, it must have looked like Ileze had vanished. As she crouched down, she performed a perfect leg sweep on the rushing Assam. The timing was perfect!

“—Uwah!?”

Assam completely lost his balance—

Crack!

He slammed his head against the corner of a shelf and fell over backward on the spot! That strike…… I saw that she had properly calculated the direction he’d fall and the position of the shelf! Hmm, not bad, Ileze.

“……Are you okay? Grandpa?”

Mr. Coffel simply hugged Ileze tightly in silence as she asked with a worried face.

—I wonder if Ileze noticed? That this was the first time she had called Mr. Coffel ‘Grandpa.’

And so, the incident ended. Assam was handed over to the officials by Hubble himself, who said, ‘A foolish son like this needs to cool his head for a while.’ Naga and I received our reward, and Ileze—well, that girl will do just fine.

“Yeah. This time it was a rare ‘happily ever after,’ wasn't it?”

“Hmph.”

Naga turned a cold look toward me as we walked along the highway.

“……What’s wrong? Got a complaint?”

“I do.”

She glared at me with half-closed eyes.

“Hmph. You might try to gloss over it, but it won't work, Lina. What’s going to happen about the fact that you and Ileze abandoned me back then……?”

Ugh…… she still remembers that……

“Bu…… but, I gave your luggage back properly……”

“That’s not the issue, is it?”

After glaring at me once with those half-closed eyes, she said with a meaningful look:

“By the way…… I heard from Mr. Coffel, Lina, that you received a guard fee for the time in town separately from the travel guard fee?”

Gasp! Ahhh! Mr. Coffel said too much!

“Tha…… that’s what I received!”

“I won't say ‘all’—but I’d like to have at least half.”

“No way! Besides, Naga, you didn't do almost anything, did you!?”

“I helped a little!”

“Just consider it a volunteer effort!”

“I will not! ……Fine…… if you absolutely won’t share the cut……”

Saying that, Naga stepped back to create distance from me.

“By force…… then? Interesting! If you think you can do it, then just try!”

Saying that, I also leaped back a great distance. The voices of the two of us chanting spells flowed through the wind for a while—

And so, once again today. Flowers of offensive spells bloomed on the highway.

(Ileze’s Journey: End)

The Village Where Darkness Dwells (Part 1)

“——Who’s there!?”

At the same time as my cry, I sat up in bed and grabbed the short sword by my pillow.

Filling the inn room was darkness and——the presence of someone.

It happened one night while staying at an inn in a certain town. I had woken up to a presence clearly directed at me.

『……Hoh…… As expected of Milady Lina Inverse…… You appear to be a practitioner who lives up to the rumors……』

The muffled voice undoubtedly came from within the room.

Just when did they get in!?

I hurriedly chanted a spell——

“Lighting!”

I produced a magical light with suppressed intensity.

Squinting against the glare as I scanned the surroundings, there was a black shadow standing quietly in the corner of the room!

An Assassin!?

“Wait!”

To me, who was about to hurriedly chant another spell, the black shadow with the lower half of his face hidden by cloth raised his voice while remaining motionless.

“I have no intention whatsoever of picking a fight with you. Actually——Milady Lina Inverse, there is something I would like your cooperation with, which is why I have come here.”

“Cooperation?”

At his words, I reflexively furrowed my brows.

I didn't know the circumstances, but the only thing I could say for sure was that this "wish" or whatever it was had to be something unpleasant.

In the first place, even if you just said "Assassin," there were various types.

The type where they take someone close to the target, strip them of their reason using drugs, and plant an intent to kill instead. The type where a failed thief falls into the profession. And——the pros, so to speak, who have thoroughly pursued and trained in "how to kill people most rationally."

It went without saying. This guy in front of me was undoubtedly the latter.

There was no way a request brought by people who would use even their own flesh and blood to complete a "job" rationally could be a decent story.

“And if I say——I don’t want to hear it?”

To my question as I got down from the bed and took a stance, the shadow said in the same quiet tone as before:

“No. You will listen. Because you are an absolutely necessary talent. For our village revitalization.”

“……Huh?”

It took a while before I let out that sound.

“Did you not hear me?”

“……No…… Well…… I thought I heard ‘village revitalization.’”

“That is correct.”

“……An assassin is doing……?”

“How rude! I am no assassin! I am Gizan. I hold the position of Public Relations Manager, entrusted with the revitalization of our village! I am by no means a suspicious person!”

……No…… standing in someone’s room at midnight dressed in black clothes feels plenty suspicious to me……

“——Our country once had an extremely strained relationship with our neighbor——”

He began to speak in a quiet tone, remaining in his motionless posture.

“Skirmishes at the border were a daily occurrence. And the sending of assassins back and forth. The King of that time, in order to cultivate excellent assassins, built a single village in the remote mountains that could be called an assassin training facility. That is the village where we live. However——during the era of the previous King, reconciliation with the neighboring country was achieved, and when the generation changed to the current King, an order was handed down. Namely——to abandon the path of the assassin and become self-sufficient.”

I see.

They built an assassin training facility, but once peace came, it became useless——or rather, a nuisance. If the existence of such a place became known to nearby countries, it would incite anxiety and distrust.

The ones in trouble were those who had lived only for their training until then, I suppose.

“So, we tried to embark on this village revitalization, but we didn't quite have the knack for it. Few people visit the village, and our reputation with the Lord is unfavorable. ——Therefore, it was decided that we would ask for the assistance of someone who travels to various regions and possesses broad knowledge.”

“I see~…… But why me? Someone like a wandering minstrel or a merchant would be fine, wouldn't they?”

“……No…… those people are no good.”

To my suggestion, he said in a somewhat bitter tone:

“In the first place, they won't even try to listen to what I have to say. The moment I stand quietly by their pillow in the middle of the night, they end up screaming and running away……”

“Normally, people *would* run…… from that……”

“Why!? If it is the way of the world for a merchant to be in a shop and a warrior to be on a battlefield, what is strange about us being in the darkness?”

“That’s why! It's not a matter of it being strange or not! The profession of an assassin itself is plenty scary, isn't it!?”

“Didn't I tell you we have already washed our hands of being assassins!?”

“Then why are you dressed like that and acting like this!?”

“It's a habit!”

I see.

“At any rate, Milady Lina, please accept this matter. Otherwise——”

“Otherwise?”

“It will mean I have failed to secure talent for the village revitalization aid. For failure, there is only death! With the explosives in my pocket, along with this room……”

“Hey, hey, hey! You quit being an assassin, didn't you!? Then there's no need to follow such a code!”

“This is not a code! It is a local custom!”

“What kind of custom is that!?!?”

I couldn't help but scream at Gizan's words.

“——So, in the end, you accepted it? That story?”

It was the following day.

On a narrow path through the forest leading to the village of former assassins.

To me, who had told her about last night, my traveling companion and "goldfish poop"——Naga, directed a blatantly suspicious gaze.

“Well, yeah. He had eyes that looked like he really might blow himself up. Besides, the commission fee was pretty good. If you come up with a good idea, I'll give you a share too.”

——To tell the truth, the commission fee was, frankly, an extraordinary price.

It seems Gizan and his group really don't understand what people call "market rates."

“Hmph! Well, if that's the case, I don't mind helping you! In the hands of me, Naga the White Serpent, village revitalization is like twisting a baby’s arm! I’ll finish it in one blow! Ho~hohoho!”

“……You…… I bet you don’t understand the meaning of village revitalization, do you……?”

“Hmph! Your thinking is shallow, Lina! What is necessary for village revitalization are the tourists who visit! What is necessary to call tourists is the village's name recognition and buzz! Is it not!?”

“Oh!? That’s a surprisingly decent logical progression for Naga! You’re certainly right about that!”

“Then, for example! If a single village were to evaporate with one blast of an attack spell, there's no way that wouldn't become a rumor!?”

“Don’t make it evaporate!!!”

Spaan!

The roundhouse kick I unleashed exploded squarely on the back of Naga’s head!

“What are you going to do if you erase the village!? The village!?”

“A little sacrifice is necessary for everything! You cannot obtain something else without losing something!”

“Even so, why are you evaporating the objective for the sake of the means!?”

“What are you saying!? You just have to build a village from scratch in the place you evaporated!”

Aaaaaagh! As I thought, this woman doesn't understand the meaning of village revitalization!

“That’s not it! ‘Village revitalization’ means further developing a village that already exists! Anyway, first! We’re going to that village now, see roughly what the situation

is, and then discuss with Gizan what would be best!”

“——Speaking of which, Lina, that client called Gizan or whatever, I don't see him?”

『——I am here——』

『Waugh!?』

At the voice that came from nowhere, Naga and I instinctively cried out at the same time.

The trees of the forest rustled, and eventually, a part of them took the form of a person.

He wore mottled green and brown clothes, with leaves and such attached here and there. The lower half of his face was covered with a similar cloth, but——

“Gizan!?”

“Indeed.”

To my questioning voice, he gave a deep nod.

“I told you last night, did I not? You may head to the village whenever you like. I will follow on my own afterward——”

……I…… I see, so he literally followed us afterward……

“……But…… why are you dressed like that and even erasing your presence……?”

“In our village, this is normal, but……?”

“In the rest of the world, it's plenty abnormal!”

“……Muu…… I didn't notice that.”

You’d notice. Normally.

“Anyway——is this the right way? ……Come to think of it, I didn't ask, but what is the name of your village? If the name has impact, that alone can become a bit of a topic.”

“That——hasn't been officially decided yet. After all, it was originally a hidden village. When the talk of village revitalization came up, I honestly thought about naming it ‘Assassin Village,’ but the Lord stopped me.”

“……Well, he would stop you……”

“For village revitalization, we've also researched various villages and towns and started making and selling local specialties and village souvenirs, but as expected, perhaps because the name recognition itself is low, it hasn't been very successful.”

……Heh. They *are* doing various things, in their own way. Even if they’re

commonplace.

“——I get it. At any rate, we have to actually see the village. Countermeasures come after that.”

“……Well…… I recognize the traces of effort, at least……”

……Hau……

Saying that, I let out one heavy sigh.

After Naga and I arrived at Gizan’s village, we were shown the "village revitalization" they had done so far……

It’s quite hopeless, this.

After the tour, we were invited to Mr. Gizan’s house and asked for our opinions, but I really didn't know how to comment……

“Is there…… something not good?”

“……Well~…… For starters, I feel like making all the souvenir shops camouflage-colored or disguised as abandoned houses is probably not a good idea.”

“Wh…… Why!?”

“Because! It's meaningless if people can't tell it's a souvenir shop! You have to open the shop more boldly and put up flashy red, yellow, and blue flags and curtains!”

“If we do such a thing, we will stand out, will we not!?”

“That's why you're supposed to stand out!”

“But it is our destiny to live in the darkness!”

“What is a souvenir shop doing living in the darkness!? Besides! This village revitalization is for the sake of escaping that darkness, isn't it!?”

“Hah!? That is true!”

Don't forget it. The objective.

Does this guy seriously intend to do village revitalization……?

“Also! The souvenirs overall are, how should I put it, too bleak! Especially the naming and catchphrases for the food-related stuff!”

“……Is…… is that so……?”

“Yes! With straight names like ‘Assassin Langue de Chat’ or ‘Assassin Manju,’ and catchphrases like ‘A numbing taste’ or ‘Heavenly deliciousness’…… No matter how you think about it, it only sounds like there’s poison in it, doesn't it!? Even for other

products, who on earth is going to buy an ‘Assassin T-shirt’ with human vital points drawn on it!? There was even a product called an ‘Assassin Pennant’ that becomes as hard as a blade when dipped in boiling water!”

“……I thought it was quite convenient and good, but……”

“How exactly is that convenient!? To some bored people who are completely softened by peace, it might appeal a little, but normally no one would buy that! Not that kind of thing!”

“Also, in the warehouse, there was a toy with a king’s head on top of a castle model. What on earth was that?”

To Naga's question from the side, Gizan said with a proud face:

“Ah? That is a toy made by the village's mechanical device user. It's called ‘Go For It, Assassin.’ If you thrust toy daggers into the windows of the castle, eventually, the king’s head flies off via a mechanical gimmick. It’s a toy where several people take turns stabbing swords, and the one who makes the king’s head fly off is the winner.”

“……”

Well…… as a game it might be pretty interesting…… but as I thought, it’s bleak……

“It was a toy I had quite a bit of confidence in. Since it also served to spread the name recognition of the Lord, I made the king’s head resemble the Lord, but for some reason, I received a scolding.”

“Of course you did!!!”

I instinctively raised my voice.

……These guys…… they're aiming for rehabilitation, but as I thought, they're assassins at heart……

“Really? I think it’s hitting a pretty good mark?”

“Naga! I didn't ask for your opinion!”

At my words, Gizan thought for a while and then said:

“……Uhm…… So that kind of thing doesn't have general appeal…… In that case——there is also a plan to give inn guests a dose of numbing drug and then sell the antidote at a bargain price, but this too, as expected——”

“Just stop it already!!!”

I shouted, breathing heavily.

At that shout, Gizan said in a somewhat offended tone:

“You say that, but——what exactly is wrong with our plans?”

“That’s why! It’s the bleak atmosphere hanging over everything! More brightly! More fun!”

“But the royal road of village revitalization lies in souvenirs and plans that make use of that village's characteristics! If we make use of this village's characteristics, it is inevitable that it turns out like this!”

“Don't just give up like that! Whether it's the royal road or the heretical road, it doesn't change the fact that you have to make the village revitalization a success, does it!?”

“Ugh…… It…… it is certainly as you say…… However, it's troubling even if you tell me to do things I can't do…… Then, for example, what kind of plan would be good?”

“Ugh……!”

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

It was certain that things couldn't go on as they were, but if I were asked what kind of method to take with what the people of this village *could* do——

I couldn't quite think of it. This was quite difficult.

“……That’s…… that’s why! I'm saying we should discuss that from now on! We'll accurately grasp the current shortcomings and pioneer new methods and products based on that reflection! ——And I want to ask honestly, how much is the budget? Depending on that, there are things we can and can't do.”

“No need to worry about the budget! If we combine the aid money from the King and the Lord, plus the village's hidden gold we've saved so far, we have a budget enough to build two or three fortresses!”

Whoa! Rich!

“Hmph! In that case, the talk is fast!”

Naga said with plenty of confidence, brushing back her hair.

……Well…… I’m sure it won’t be a decent opinion anyway……

“If you want to call tourists, you just have to use what any human would want as bait! In other words——treasure!”

“……Ah!”

I see! There was that way!

However, perhaps Gizan didn't quite get it, as he slightly furrowed his brows and said:

“……What…… does that mean?”

“Ho~hohoho! It's a simple thing! You change a part of the budget into treasure and have a treasure hunt using this village itself! You hold it once a month or so, and with

the rest of the budget, you create obstacles for the treasure hunt! And you guys also stand on the side of the interference!”

“Oh! I see!”

Gizan clapped his hands and said:

“A village-wide treasure hunt once a month! This certainly seems like it can call guests! And numerous obstacles to liven up the fun! Traps that invite death! A labyrinth without an exit! And our certain-kill assassins!”

“Don’t kill them!!!”

I threw cold water on the fired-up Gizan.

“The opponents are just tourists! Not enemies! For the treasure, about several dozen gold coins for first place is fine! For professional mercenaries or mages, it might be pocket change, but from the perspective of ordinary people, it’s a fine sum of money! Mazes that are just a little confusing and traps to the degree that you can laugh them off! There should be a small number of pursuers, and if you get caught by them, a time penalty for the treasure hunt——that kind of thing is fine!”

“But then the treasure will be taken away!”

“You're *supposed* to let them take it! You just have to make up for it with low participation fees, inn fees, and those very souvenirs! Well, at first, there might be a bit of a deficit, but if you advertise properly in nearby large towns, and guests start coming and it becomes a topic, once it gets on track, the number of guests and the income will snowball! Snowball! With that, the village revitalization will be a grand success! You'll also be able to fulfill your duty as Public Relations Manager!”

“Oh! I see!”

……It seems he finally understood.

“I understand! Then, let’s immediately put this plan——”

“Commander!”

Interrupting Gizan's words and flying into the room was a man also dressed as an assassin.

The door should have been closed, but the fact that the sound of it opening wasn't heard at all was as expected of a former assassin, or rather……

“I am not the Commander! I am the Public Relations Manager! ——What is it!? I'm in the middle of seeing guests!”

“……Th…… that is……”

The man glanced toward us and then whispered something into Gizan's ear.

“——What!?”

Gizan raised a voice of agitation, and turning back toward us, he said:

“——I'm sorry, but it seems there was a small fire at the souvenir shop. I'm going to go see the situation. Please, both of you, make yourselves comfortable here. ——Anis!”

“Right here!”

『Uwoh!?』

In response to Gizan's call, Naga and I instinctively let out voices of shock at the girl who suddenly appeared.

She looked to be about the same age as Naga. Short-cut black hair. Her clothes were similar to Gizan's after all, but the only difference was that her face wasn't hidden.

However, what was surprising was her method of appearance. She——had come down. From above.

“……What…… on earth……?”

“No need to worry. This is my younger sister, Anis. If you have any requests, please let her know. ——Anis, I’m counting on you to take care of the guests. I don't need to explain who these people are, do I?”

“Yes, Brother. I have been listening to the circumstances from behind the ceiling.”

If you’re going to listen, listen boldly right here……

So that’s why she came down from above.

“Well then, I shall excuse myself for a moment.”

With that, Gizan left a bow and ran out of the room without making a sound, along with the man who had come to call him.

“Well then, I will bring some drinks.”

“……Wait, Anis.”

I instinctively called out to Anis as she was about to leave.

“……Is something wrong?”

“I want to ask…… why are you climbing up the wall just to bring drinks?”

“Because——I’m going to the kitchen through the attic……”

“That’s why! I'm asking why you're going through the attic! Why can't you just head to the kitchen normally!?”

“But I’m not good with bright places…… Crawling through dark, narrow places

somehow makes me feel more at ease.”

……Are…… are you a cockroach…… you……

The people of this village…… are really assassins to the core in personality……

“……I…… I get it…… go through wherever you like……”

To me, who said that in a tired tone, Anis left a light bow and disappeared into the attic.

Somehow~…… well, it’s fine, but……

That aside——

I sent a glance toward Naga and lowered my voice slightly:

“By the way, Naga…… it seems like things won't go so smoothly as village revitalization succeeding, then happily ever after, then goodbye——after all.”

“Hmph! Isn’t that obvious!”

Naga brushed back her hair and said:

“Once the village revitalization begins, I’m going to snatch up the treasure under the guise of ‘test play’! Why on earth do you think I, Naga the White Serpent, proposed the idea of a treasure hunt!? Ho~hohoho!”

So that was your scheme. This woman.

“That’s not it! Just now, Mr. Gizan said, ‘There was a small fire, so I’m going to go see.’ didn’t he!?”

“He said that, but?”

“That's why! Why does the Public Relations Manager——the village revitalization person——have to go out of his way just because there was a small fire!? Besides! The appearance of the person who brought the report to him wasn't ordinary, was it!?”

“Hmph. Aren't you overthinking it? A souvenir shop burned down, so he, the village revitalization person, was called out——couldn't it just simply be that?”

“That’s certainly true, but…… if you think about it, why did they go out of their way to ask me for village revitalization instead of some traveler around there——perhaps——”

“Perhaps?”

“This village, in a place we don't know about, something might be happening.”

“……Hmm……?”

I woke up in the middle of the night that day.

I had been given a room in Gizan's house and had gone to sleep for a while, but I woke up because of a strange foreboding.

At times like this, usually nothing good happens——

Just as I thought. It came abruptly.

Bloodlust. And without a moment’s delay——

Gogaaan!

An explosive sound echoed in the surroundings!

The wall of the room that blew apart turned into rubble and buried the bed!

“……Hmph…… Foolish…… If you hadn't lent a hand to things like village revitalization, you wouldn't have had to die……”

From beyond the billowing smoke, an unfamiliar man's voice was heard.

“Just as I thought——as expected, there were circumstances.”

“What!?”

A voice of surprise answered my words.

Eventually, the smoke and dust settled, and what I saw there——

Beyond the collapsed wall. In the backyard with a low hedge, bathed in moonlight, were black shadows standing there. Shadow. Shadow. Shadow.

All in black clothes, even their faces covered with cloth except for their eyes, about five or six people in assassin attire.

From the fact that the smell of gunpowder was faintly mixed in the wind, it seemed they had used explosives rather than an attack spell.

“You! Are you alive!?”

“Of course! If you thought you could do something to me with that level of explosives, you’re dead wrong!”

Probably they had intended to set the explosives outside the wall and bury me under the rubble, but——

Since I had quickly left the bed and set up a wind barrier with a spell, that scheme had easily crumbled.

“……Kuh……! It seems you can do a bit! However, it seems your companion didn't fare so well!”

Certainly, the room next door where Naga should have been sleeping had also had its

wall collapsed by explosives, and the bed was buried under the rubble.

——However——

“……Hmph…… if you think you’ve finished off Naga with that, you’re dead wrong.”

“Stop your bluffing! The bed is buried! There are no signs of escape! There’s no way she could be saved!”

『Ho~hohoho! If you really think so, you’re quite naive again! Whoever you are!』

“……Wh…… what!?”

At Naga's high-pitched laughter echoing from somewhere, the black-clad figures showed clear signs of agitation.

“I…… Impossible!? Where is she!?”

“Her voice and presence are certainly there!?”

They looked around restlessly, but her figure was nowhere to be seen.

Well, that’s to be expected.

If my imagination was correct——she’s probably under the rubble.

Probably Naga, until the moment of the explosion, continued to sleep soundly without noticing it and ended up under the rubble.

But of course, that Naga isn't the kind of person who would die from something like that.

She must have just stayed buried around there, heard the conversation between me and the black-clad figures, and let out that high-pitched laughter.

“——Eei! Well, fine! If you’re still alive, I’ll just give you death again! Prepare——”

Cutting off his words halfway, the black-clad figures froze on the spot.

The collective gaze was directed not at me——but toward the area behind me.

“……Gi…… Gizan……!?”

——Yes.

Just when had he been there? Exactly like my shadow, a single human figure standing quietly.

“Tch! We were noticed!?”

One of the black-clad figures clicked his tongue.

……No…… if your house is suddenly blown up with explosives, I think most people would notice……

If anything, it seems like he could have come a little sooner……

“……Hmph…… It's troubling if you underestimate me. I, too, am a man who was once called ‘Gizan of the Lightning’—— It took a little time to put on my black clothes, but I will never fall behind the likes of you!”

Don't put them on. Not leisurely like that……

“I thought you might move, but…… As expected! You anti-factions!”

Anti-faction?

“——Tch! We’re retreating! Scatter!”

At the command of black-clad figure number one, they all turned and started to run.

“I won't let you!”

Gizan gave a shout and set about chanting a spell.

——This was——

For a moment, I thought about pursuing them, but realizing what the spell Gizan was chanting was, I gave up.

And Gizan's art was completed.

“Arc Brass!” (Earth Spirit Roaring Lightning Array)

It’s a high-level lightning-type spell, a rather grand art that scatters weak lightning strikes over an extremely wide range.

The offensive power of the lightning strikes is low and cannot become a fatal wound, but it is easy to paralyze a human who is directly hit for a while.

With this, the assassins would be incapacitated. Then he just had to capture them, question them, and make them talk about the organization's relationships.

I wouldn't have any activity at all, but that should have been the end of everything——

However.

The arms of lightning born indiscriminately all around changed their trajectory just before the fleeing black-clad figures, as if avoiding them!

『What!?』

Gizan and I voiced our shock in unison.

The lightning strikes that showed momentary ferocity ended up not hitting a single one of the assassins in the end.

And before long, the figures of the assassins melted into the darkness and disappeared.

“Impossible!? Just what……!?”

Gizan stood there blankly and muttered.

It was no wonder. Considering his nickname, for him, that must have been a technique he was confident in. Yet it had produced no effect at all.

However, it would be troublesome if he just got depressed here.

“——Those people, they said ‘anti-faction,’ didn't they? So they really are the anti-village revitalization faction?”

“Uh…… uhm…… Although it has been decided that we will become an ordinary village by order of the King and the Lord, there are some among us who, as expected, rebel against things like village revitalization. Absolute obedience to orders from above is our code——I mean, custom. If we are told to do village revitalization, we must do it——persuaded thus by the Chief——I mean, the Village Head, everyone is pretending to be convinced on the surface, but…… among them, like this, there are also those who resort to strong-arm tactics to obstruct the village revitalization. Actually, the small fire during the day was also their doing……”

“……So, you chose us, who seem like we could protect ourselves to some extent, as advisors, right?”

“That is correct—— ……By the way, I don't see Naga-dono's figure…… could it be……!?”

“Ho~hohoho!”

As if answering Gizan's words, Naga the White Serpent pushed aside the pile of rubble in the next room and stood up straight with both hands on her waist!

“I am not the Naga the White Serpent who would fall from an attack of that level!”

“……Oh…… uhm…… Glad you’re safe……”

Gizan said in a tone that was, as expected, a bit taken aback.

Naga looked around restlessly for a while, and then:

“——Speaking of which, after all this noise, I don't see Anis's figure……”

——Hah! Come to think of it!

“Could it be!?”

Following Gizan as he hurriedly ran out, Naga and I also started to run.

Gizan threw open the door to one room——

And stood frozen for a while.

A disheveled bed. An open window.

There was no sign of anyone anywhere.

Beside the curtain fluttering in the wind, a single letter was pinned to the wall with a knife.

In the letter, it was written like this:

> Gizan-dono,
>
> If Anis-dono is dear to you, stop the village revitalization immediately.
>
> This is a warning.

And so——

(The Village Where Darkness Dwells: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

The anti-village revitalization secret society acting in the shadows! And the kidnapped Anis! Is there a way to save her!? Lina Inverse!? And what of the success or failure of the village revitalization!

Next time, "The Village Where Darkness Dwells" (Part 2)!

The Village Where Darkness Dwells (Part 2)

Synopsis

The former assassin Gizan asked Naga and me for a favor: to help with a "town revitalization" project for a village inhabited entirely by former assassins. Just as our brainstorming session ended successfully and I thought things were settled peacefully, a group of anti-revitalization rebels attacked Naga and me that night!

We managed to drive them off, but they left behind a single letter. It claimed they had taken Gizan’s younger sister, Anis…

"...Anis...!"

Gizan let out a low groan and crushed the ransom note in his fist.

"Curse them! Those rebels! Using such cowardly tactics!"

"This is no time to be frustrated! Let's go! After them!"

If they snatched Anis in the middle of that confusion, the enemy shouldn't be too far away yet. If we move now, we might be able to get her back without too much trouble.

"But...! Even if you say 'after them,' we have no lead! Those rebels were once professionals; I doubt they'd leave a trail..."

"A lead—well, there is one. Do you know anyone who knows your techniques but also uses iron threads or wire?"

"Iron threads or wire?"

"Yeah. When you used your *Arc Brass* earlier, the movement of the lightning was unnatural, right? If my guess is correct, they probably used something like a lightning rod to divert the path of the strike."

"I see... in that case—I might have an idea. A man named Razelam, who, like me, once held the rank of Commander. He's known by the alias 'The Thread-Spinner of Death.' It seems he didn't look too kindly on this town revitalization project after all. It must be him—or one of his subordinates—"

"Alright! Then let's head to his place immediately! Of course, there's no guarantee his house is the hideout, but there should be some kind of clue there!"

"Understood! Follow me!"

Lina and Naga started running, following Gizan as he dashed off without making a single footfall.

"It's here."

Gizan stopped in front of a modest house located somewhat on the outskirts of town. The lights in the windows were out. At first glance, it looked like everyone was fast asleep, but—

After all, the opponent was a former assassin. If he was a master on par with Gizan, erasing his presence would be child's play.

Gizan crossed his arms for a moment.

"Now... the problem is how to sneak in... though, perhaps there's no need for deliberation? Come out! Whoever is there!"

The moment he called out, a human presence emerged from a spot where there had been none.

"...As expected of Master Gizan. I thought I had completely erased my presence."

Along with the voice, a human shadow shimmered and emerged from behind a nearby garden tree.

"It was very slight, but a hint of agitation leaked out, Master Razelam."

—*Ho ho*. So this is the guy.

...That said, this man, just like Gizan, was dressed head-to-toe in black in the typical "assassin style." Naturally, his face was covered, so I couldn't see his features.

"—So? Master Gizan, what business could you possibly have in the middle of the night?"

"...That is..."

Gizan hesitated when asked. He likely felt some hesitation in calling someone an attacker without solid proof.

However—

"That's what I want to ask," I said, facing Razelam. "Why were you waiting outside for us?"

"...I... I wasn't waiting for you! I woke up at the sound of an explosion and came out to check things out when someone approached. Out of habit, I hid myself, and it just happened to be Master Gizan!"

I see. Well, that's a consistent story, I guess.

In that case—

I intentionally frowned with exaggerated suspicion.

"Explosion? What are you talking about?"

"I told you! Master Gizan's house was—"

Razelam cut himself off in a panic. It seemed he finally realized he'd been tricked by me. But it was too late.

I wore a wicked grin.

"—Ho hoooo. So, just by hearing a loud noise while inside your own house and stepping outside, you knew that Gizan's house had been blown up?"

I thought he might scramble for an excuse, but Razelam instead let out a defiant smirk.

"...Heh heh heh... You got me fair and square... But I didn't expect you to realize it was my doing so easily..."

Gizan glared at Razelam with eyes full of hidden rage.

"So it was you... You were the leader of the rebels?! Why do you oppose the town revitalization?! Is it because you're jealous that I was appointed Public Relations Manager over you?!"

"No, wait, that's a bit off."

Razelam waved his hands dismissively with a surprisingly cheerful gesture.

"First of all, Gizan, are you really satisfied with this?! A man once known as 'Gizan of the Lightning' is now 'Gizan, Town Revitalization PR Manager'! Do you not find it pathetic?!"

"Urgh... admittedly, I think the phrasing is a bit awkward, but..."

"It's not a matter of phrasing! This 'town revitalization' means that we, who should naturally live in the darkness, must live by flattering tourists from who-knows-where! No matter if it's an order from the King or the Lord, I won't hear of it!"

"...Admittedly, I don't entirely misunderstand your argument. Even I haven't completely moved past it. But—the times have changed, Razelam. Besides, even if you oppose the revitalization, what will that actually achieve?! In the end, it just causes unnecessary trouble within the village!"

"—No... depending on how it's handled, that's not quite true," Razelam said meaningfully. "We shall assassinate the King of the neighboring country."

"—What...!?"

The surprised voices of Naga, Gizan, and myself overlapped.

"—No. It doesn't actually matter if the assassination succeeds. Either way, relations with the neighboring country will turn sour again. The era where we, who live in the darkness, are needed will return!"

...This guy... he was thinking of *that*?! He's a much bigger headache than I thought. If this country goes to war with the neighbor—

"Are you sane, Razelam?!" Gizan cried out in shock. "If you do such a thing, the King won't stay silent! He might send the army to crush this village!"

"—No, I don't think so. If the army attacks this village, they would certainly crush it through sheer numbers. But this is a village of assassins. Even if they crush us, the Royal Army would take a devastating blow. If the situation with the neighbor is on the verge of exploding—or if war has actually broken out—they'll want to save every soldier they can. Unless the King is a total fool, he'll realize it's better to use this village than to destroy it."

"...You bastard...!"

"—I can't forgive that..."

The one who stepped forward with a quiet tone was none other than me, Lina Inverse.

"To plot a war just because you 'don't like town revitalization'—"

"You can't forgive it?" Razelam snorted at my words. "Are you going to preach with that 'justice' face? I never intended to be forgiven by the likes of you anyway!"

"—The lamb dishes of the Lakedoria region—"

Ignoring his words entirely, I took another heavy step forward.

"Roasted Mineba ducklings! Herb-steamed Radaria beef! Don't miss the seasonal Milsa cuisine!"

"...Ugh...!?"

Perhaps pressured by the intensity of my stride as I spoke, Razelam involuntarily backed away.

"There are so many famous local dishes I haven't even tasted yet! If this country and the neighbor go to war, I won't be able to eat those specialties anymore! Not for the sake of justice and peace! But for the sake of eating local delicacies! I will not forgive you!"

"Hey, wait! You told people 'I won't accept a reason like not liking revitalization,' but your reason for not forgiving me is 'because I want to eat local food'?!"

"As long as I'm not bothering anyone else, any reason is fine!"

"What kind of logic is that?!"

"It's the logic right here!"

"...Argh! This is going nowhere! Either way, you're an obstacle! In that case, I'll have you disappear immediately!"

As he spoke, Razelam lightly spread both hands to his sides, making a strange movement.

"Watch out!"

Whish!

Gizan's voice and the howl of the wind came at the same time. Sensing a faint murderous intent, I leaped far backward.

And—nothing happened. At least, not visually.

I had a general idea of what Razelam had done. Just like when he avoided Gizan's lightning, he was likely attacking by manipulating metal threads or wires.

"...Hoh... You dodged the first strike. But I wonder if the next one will go so well?"

Razelam wore a fearless smirk.

Indeed—dodging this attack was an extremely difficult feat. If it were just a metal whip, I could blast it with a lightning-type spell and let him get shocked, but since he used this to dodge Gizan's lightning, he must have some countermeasure against electricity.

Furthermore, while I might be able to see silver—or black—trails during the day, it's almost impossible to track the movement of thin threads by just moon and starlight.

In that case, our options were limited. Specifically—hit him before he hits us.

The problem was the time lag for spell incantation, but there was no time to worry. I quickly began chanting a spell.

"I won't let you!"

Razelam unleashed his technique again. While chanting, I leaped backward once more.

—But.

The howl of the wind was closing in! Its reach was longer than I thought?!

But at that moment!

"*Chaos String!*"

Naga's voice drowned out the sound of the wind!

Twang!

"—Guh!?"

At the same time as the sound of a thread tightening, Razelam let out a small cry of pain.

In Naga’s raised right palm, I could see a faint glow, like magical energy. It was a technique I didn't know, but I could guess what she was doing. Naga had likely used magic to entangle Razelam's threads, sealing their movement.

"Im... Impossible?! This is—?!"

"Ho ho ho ho! Don't make me laugh! You didn't think you were the only assassin in the world who could manipulate metal threads, did you?! Compared to the techniques of that assassin named Boulay I defeated before, you're still just a beginner!"

"Don't talk big!"

Razelam barked and moved both hands, trying to manipulate the threads. Naga worked to prevent him. Over a single thread—or several—stretched between them, a battle of skill versus magic was unfolding.

...But...

Because the threads were invisible, from the side, it just looked like two people facing each other and doing a weird dance. Truly.

There wasn't much of a sense of tension. Regardless, there was no need to wait for this match to conclude.

"*Mega Brand!*"

KABOOM!

The offensive spell I chanted successfully blew away both Naga and Razelam.

"—Now then. I'll have you return my sister."

Gizan grabbed the fallen Razelam by the collar, hauled him up, and questioned him.

"...She... she's not here..."

"Not here?! Then where is she?!"

Razelam groaned, and Gizan brought his face close.

"I... I don't know..."

"There's no way you don't know! Don't tell such obvious lies!"

"...It's the truth...! It's true we planned to take Lady Anis hostage... But according to

the person who was supposed to take her—when they went to her room, there was already no one in the bed..."

"What?!"

"...They left the prepared letter saying 'I've kidnapped your sister' there for the time being and searched all over, but couldn't find her. Meanwhile, they heard the explosion and approaching footsteps and fled the scene..."

It was an incredibly fishy story. That said, even if I pointed that out, I didn't think Razelam was the type to suddenly start speaking the honest truth about everything.

"—Fine. For now, I'm taking you to my house. Cool your head for the night. Tomorrow, I'll have you tell me everything in detail."

Saying this, Gizan pulled a thin, strong-looking cord from his tunic.

The next morning.

What woke me up was the fragrant scent of soup. Judging by the aroma, it was probably a chicken consommé.

Drawn by the smell, I went to the dining table where a delicious-looking breakfast of salad, toast, and scrambled eggs was waiting for me.

And—

"Good morning!"

Landing!

Along with the morning greeting, dropping down in front of me from above with a tray of soup in one hand was none other than Anis—the person who was supposed to be missing.

"...A... Anis?!"

"...Yes? Is something wrong?"

She tilted her head curiously at the voice I had involuntarily raised.

A moment of silence. And then—

"Anis?!"

As usual, Gizan—who appeared in the doorway before anyone noticed—raised a voice of shock.

"Are you safe?!"

"...Safe... well... nothing happened to me though?"

"...Hmph. What's wrong? So early in the morning...?"

Noticing the commotion, Naga also arrived on the scene. She was as nonchalant as ever, not even surprised by Anis's appearance.

"Where did you go last night?!"

At Gizan's question, Anis looked a bit bewildered.

"Nowhere in particular... It was a bit stuffy and hard to sleep, so I was resting in the attic."

...Oh boy...

"Then—did you notice the commotion last night...?"

"Of course I did. Looking from the attic, the wall was blown up, and I saw the guests and my brother jumping out. I thought about following, but I didn't really understand the situation... so I just stayed and rested.

—Ah. Also. I've already requested repairs for the wall. I think someone will be here shortly."

...I... I see...

In that case, what Razelam said last night wasn't a lie after all. We caught Razelam, the leader of the rebels, so if we just got to work on the town revitalization in earnest, everything should be settled. —Or so it should have been.

Until *that* man came flying into the room.

"Commander!"

As if repeating yesterday's events, a man burst into the room while the four of us were eating breakfast.

"—What is it? So early in the morning?"

Gizan didn't even bother correcting the man for calling him "Commander," asking in a tired tone. The man glanced at us and tried to move closer to Gizan to whisper, but Gizan held up a hand.

"—It's fine. Speak here."

"But, sir—"

"It's fine. It's just about the anti-revitalization rebels or something anyway, right? These people were invited for the revitalization. In fact, it's better if they hear it."

"Then... regarding the explosives the rebels set at the Commander's—no, the PR Manager's house last night—"

"You don't need to tell me."

"Yes. Of course, others noticed too, and some came here to see what was

happening... but in the middle of all that confusion, the town revitalization funds were stolen from the village's hidden warehouse!"

...What...!

"What?!"

Gizan finally let out a voice of genuine shock.

Of course, this wasn't someone else's problem for Naga and me either. If there's no funding, then obviously, revitalizing the town through a treasure hunt is impossible. If the revitalization fails, our reward as advisors—well, it's not like we wouldn't get paid, but it would definitely be reduced.

"What were the guards doing?!"

"Well... since the fire broke out at the PR Manager's house, everyone thought it was a rebel attack and gathered to come look... It seems that during that gap..."

Certainly, when we brought Razelam back to the house yesterday, there was a crowd of people in assassin outfits around. I had everyone disperse, telling them we caught the culprit—

"—Oh. Wait a minute," Naga said, waving her spoon. "Does that mean Razelam isn't the leader of the rebels?"

"—Ah!?"

Gizan's and my voices harmonized.

According to the report, the money was stolen from the hidden warehouse *after* this house was attacked. In that case, Razelam naturally couldn't be the culprit.

Thinking about the strategy, the attack was likely a diversion, and the theft of the funds was the true objective. Would the leader of the rebels personally participate in a mere diversion?

...Well, maybe Razelam *is* the leader, and he just went with the diversion because he was the only one who could seal Gizan's techniques...

"...In any case, we must recover the funds. Getting Razelam to talk about the rebels—that would be the fastest way... but I don't think he'll talk easily..."

Hmm... I doubt the thieves left any clues at the scene...

—In the first place, where do they plan to hide the stolen funds? Given the nature of this village's residents, they'd probably search every single house to get the money back. In that case, they naturally can't hide it somewhere it would be found easily.

Would they just throw it away?—No. The rebels' wish is to live as assassins again. If that wish comes true, it's better to have funds.

Burying it—that's probably out. No matter how well you do it, the signs of dug-up

earth are obvious.

If that's the case—

"...Hey Gizan, is there a stagnant pond or swamp nearby where people don't usually go?"

"A pond or swamp? No, there's just a small stream running nearby and some wells—why?"

"No—I was just wondering where the rebels would hide the stolen gold coins. It must be a considerable amount, right?"

"Yes. It's quite a lot."

The one who answered wasn't Gizan, but the man who brought the report.

"However—it's gold dust, not coins."

"Gold dust?!"

If it's gold dust, that changes the story. Since it’s not in blocks, you can hide it almost anywhere. For example—

"...Oh...?"

"Did something happen, Lady Lina?"

Gizan turned a questioning look toward me at my murmur.

"...No... I just thought of something... but if you think about it, it actually makes sense... hmm..."

Indeed, if my guess is correct, all the pieces fit together. Which means...

"—Excuse me—! We're here to repair the wall!"

At that voice from outside, I stood up from my seat.

Beyond the collapsed wall, more than ten men had arrived. By the time I led everyone to the scene, they had already begun removing the debris.

...Of course, everyone was still in their assassin outfits...

"The repair crew Anis called, I assume?"

"Yes. ...But I don't think this is the time to be watching a wall repair..."

Ignoring the nodding Anis, I sauntered over to the group working.

"...Hey! What is it?! Please don't get in the way."

One of the men raised a voice of complaint, but I naturally ignored him.

Outside, there were several buckets the men had presumably brought. They were

filled with wall plaster that had been mixed into a mud-like consistency.

I took off my right glove—

...I hate getting dirty even a little bit, but...

Splosh!

I thrust my right hand into one of the buckets.

"...What...?!"

Leaving the group shouting in surprise behind, I pulled my hand out and spread it in front of everyone.

"—Now then... Care to explain, Anis? What exactly is this stuff mixed into the plaster that looks exactly like gold dust?"

"...W-what does this mean?!"

Gizan was completely flustered. It seems he truly hadn't considered that his own sister might be a member of the rebels.

"I heard a story once about a man who hid gold dust by mixing it into mud. I just remembered that."

I said, holding the mud with its golden glint on my right hand.

"At the time, I thought it was weird. When and who did Anis ask to repair the wall? According to her, she rested after we left last night. But she didn't seem to have made any contact this morning either.

—Come to think of it, it's also strange that the people who attacked here yesterday knew exactly which room Naga and I were staying in."

The plan the rebels made was likely originally something like this:

Kill Naga and me with explosives. Anis would slip out of the house before the attack and pretend to be kidnapped. While the village's attention was focused on Gizan's house, Anis would steal the funds.

Then, they'd likely meet up around Razelam's house, and Anis would be "released" because "the theft was successful and she's no longer needed." After that, if they repaired the wall of this house with the gold-laden plaster and painted over it nicely, the location of the gold would never be discovered.

However, the plan went awry when we caught Razelam so easily. Razelam covered for Anis being an accomplice with a random lie, and Anis told her own lies to carry out the plan as intended—and likely planned to rescue Razelam if she saw an opening.

"Well, if it were just my imagination, you might have been able to talk your way out of it, but now that the gold has turned up, anything you say is useless!"

"...Tch!"

"Curse you! If it's come to this—!"

Realizing there was no way out after my words, the "wall repairers"—no, the rebel members—deployed to surround us.

"Stop this, Anis! At this point, resistance is futile! You surely know that, don't you?!"

"—I know! but if I surrender quietly here, my pride as someone who worked for the anti-revitalization movement won't allow it!"

Anis refused to listen to Gizan's words.

"...If you obsess over that kind of boring pride, you won't live a fun life, you know."

"Shut up! The ambition to sabotage the revitalization has already crumbled, but if it's come to this, I'll at least eliminate you outsiders! Go!"

"Yes!"

At Anis’s command, the rebels pulled daggers from their tunics and took stances.

...Ho ho. Interesting.

"Ho ho ho ho! If you want to stick to your pride that much, I'll let you! I'll let every single one of you die beautifully!"

Naga puffed out her chest and made a grand declaration, and I gave a big nod.

"Agreed! Gizan! Don't interfere! Alright, Anis, let's settle this!"

"Bring it on! Attack!"

At Anis’s command, one person rushed in, followed an instant later by another toward Naga and me!

The key was that they weren't attacking at exactly the same time. By slightly staggering the timing, if we made a clumsy dodge, the next attack would come immediately.

But—

Kicking sound!

While chanting a spell, I kicked one of the buckets at my feet toward the approaching men!

"Whoa-?!"

The two were caught off guard by the mud and the bucket. They didn't fall over, but losing their balance was enough.

I aimed for that moment and threw the gold-flecked mud I was holding in my right

hand into the men's eyes!

"What?!"

"Gwah?!"

Getting mud in their faces while off-balance was too much to endure; the men lost their footing and collapsed.

And behind me, Naga finished her spell. She had been chanting *Freeze Arrow*. It's a spell that fires multiple arrows of cold, but the opponents were professional assassins. Doing it normally would just result in them dodging.

—Yes. If done *normally*.

"Freeze..."

Aiming for the moment Naga uttered the "word of power" to release her magic, I kicked the back of her knee.

"Arrooooowwwwww?!"

Even while losing her balance, she firmly released the spell! The ice arrows surged toward a direction that neither the rebels—nor even Naga or I—had expected!

This was truly unforeseen; several rebels and even the man who had brought the report to Gizan took direct hits.

"—Curse you!"

Losing their cool, the rebels closed the distance all at once.

But that too was expected! I had already finished chanting my own spell for this!

"*Dill Brand!*"

BOOM!

It's a spell that causes the ground around the caster to erupt.

—A total sweep.

The rebels who had carelessly approached were all laid low, except for one.

Specifically—Anis, who had been cautious and hadn't rushed in.

...Well, the buckets containing the gold-dust plaster were also overturned, but I'll have the rebels cry while they gather it up later...

The problem was how to take down Anis—

"...You're good... I was careless thinking you were amateurs, but to think everyone would be taken down so easily..."

Anis said without taking her eyes off me.

"But this is as far as it goes! Behold my technique, which I've never even shown my brother!"

Saying this, Anis raised her empty left palm toward me.

—How will she attack?!

As I braced myself, the sound of a faint incantation reached my ears. This wasn't Anis! It was Naga, still knocked over by me, grumbling her spell!

Wait, Naga, that spell is—!

"Everyone, get down!"

The moment I said that.

"*Bomb Di Wind!*"

KA-BLAST!

The fierce wind Naga released blew away everything in the vicinity.

"Ho ho ho ho! Have you learned your lesson?! Lina Inverse! This is what happens when you kick me, Naga the White Serpent, from behind!"

"WHO ARE YOU TRYING TO TEACH A LESSON TOOO?!"

Thwack!

The kick I unleashed as I stood up hit Naga square in the face!

Right after shouting, I had scrambled to stay down, so I managed to avoid a direct hit from the wind.

...Though it seems everyone else didn't make it in time...

Naga took my kick to the face and recoiled slightly, but she seemed almost unaffected.

"Hmph! So you're still alive, Lina! But with the next strike, I'll finish—"

"DON'T FINISH ME! Listen! Because of your spell just now, the gold-dust mud is REALLY scattered everywhere! If we can't recover the gold and the reward gets canceled, what are you going to do?!"

"...Eh...?!

At my point, even Naga's complexion changed.

"Th-that's... surely..."

"Prepare yourself!"

Cutting off Naga’s words, Anis—who had somehow recovered—charged in with a dagger in one hand!

But!

Snap!

"Ow?!"

It was Gizan who kicked the dagger out of her hand and stopped her movement.

"The match is over! This is unsightly!"

"...Tch...!"

As Anis collapsed onto her knees, Gizan turned a quiet gaze toward her.

"...No matter the reason, orders from above and the village's decisions are absolute. You know what happens to those who betray us, don't you?"

"...Yes..."

Anis nodded at his words.

...Gosh...

"The one who doesn't understand is you, Gizan."

"? What do you mean by that, Lady Lina?"

"...I mean, you've quit being assassins, right? Then throw away those stiff rules and customs. Sure, the rebels' methods were extreme. But at least settle for something like making them work for free in mascot costumes for the town revitalization for the rest of their lives."

"...That might actually be worse..."

At my "nice" suggestion, for some reason, Anis whispered while crying.

The incident was over.

Thanks to the rebels crying as they gathered the gold dust scattered by Naga's and my spells, we recovered about 90% of it.

Including the reward for capturing the rebels all at once, our commission was considerably higher than planned.

The punishment for the rebels was light, and the plan for the town revitalization was decided as the treasure hunt Naga and I suggested.

The rest was up to their own skill.

And so, Naga and I left the village.

—Later.

According to rumors floating on the wind, their town revitalization project was a spectacular failure. Apparently, traps set everywhere resulted in a series of injuries among the participants, and the Lord put a stop to it.

...Well, if you think about it calmly, the level of a "laughable trap" for the people of that village and a "laughable trap" for normal people are completely different.

Hearing that story, I've been feeling a little worried lately.

—Specifically, that Gizan might come back in the middle of the night to ask for help with town revitalization again.

(The Village Where Darkness Dwells: End)

Unjust Accusations (Part 1)

“...So, you’re Lina Inverse.”

The man addressed me on the afternoon of a particularly clear, sunny day. At the time, Naga and I were at a town café terrace, elegantly engaging in a competitive speed-eating contest over a "Afternoon Tea Time Set."

He looked to be in his early forties. He had short brown hair and didn't look especially wealthy, but he was dressed respectably enough—a rather dapper-looking middle-aged guy.

“Yep.”

Without pausing my frantic eating, I gave him a curt nod.

Normally, I’d try to avoid trouble by claiming to be someone else, but circumstances didn't allow for that right now. Specifically—the loser of this speed-eating contest had to foot the bill. I didn't have a second to waste on idle chatter.

Beside us, as we continued to shovel tea sets into our mouths, the man rummaged in his coat and pulled something out.

“I am Wizer Freion, Special Investigator for the Kingdom of Ruvinagald.”

I spared him a sidelong glance and saw him brandishing a pendant engraved with what looked like a royal crest.

—The Kingdom of Ruvinagald—

It’s a grand-sounding name, but most people have never heard of it. To put it bluntly, it’s just one of the many tiny nations belonging to the Coastal States Alliance. Even calling it a "country" is a stretch; it's about the size of a large regional fiefdom, and despite the alliance name, it doesn't even border the sea.

Its only claim to fame is being a producer of Ruvin Cedar, which makes for good shipbuilding material. It’s a thoroughly forgettable place, usually dismissed as "just another one of those Coastal Alliance countries." The only reason Naga and I had stopped by was on a whim: *"Oh, hey, I forgot this place existed. Let’s drop in for a bit so we have something to talk about later."*

But... what business could a Special Investigator from a place like that have with me, Lina Inverse? Surely he wasn't here to beg for an autograph...

“I heard through the Sorcerers' Guild that you had arrived in this town,” Wizer said in a strictly businesslike tone as he tucked his pendant away. “Lina Inverse. You are being taken in for questioning regarding the serial kidnapping of young children.”

……

“WHAAAAAAAAT!?”

I screamed in spite of myself at Wizer’s words.

“Wait—wait a minute! What is this about 'kidnapping children'!?”

“Hmph! Playing dumb is useless! I know you are the culprit behind the serial kidnappings that have occurred across Ruvinagald recently! You might as well confess your crimes now!”

“...H-How did you even reach that conclusion!? Besides, I only just arrived in this country! Right, Naga!?”

I turned to her for support, but contrary to my expectations...

“...Heh... You know, your sentence might be lighter if you just honestly admit to what you've done,” Naga said with a faint smirk, never slowing the speed at which her fork traveled to her mouth.

“Listen, you...!”

“That settles it!” Wizer bellowed, cutting off my retort to Naga. He pointed a finger straight at me, his voice booming through the entire café. “Just as my reasoning suggested, you *are* the culprit!”

“I told you I’m not! ...And besides! On what grounds did you decide I was the criminal!?”

In response to my question, Wizer puffed out his chest and declared:

“My intuition!”

“ARE YOU AN IDIOT!?”

I kicked my chair back and stood up.

“Where on earth is the logic in that!? You mean to tell me that anyone you find 'suspicious' is a criminal!?”

“Exactly!”

“Aaaaagh! You’re impossible to talk to!”

I clutched my head in frustration.

They exist! These people who live their lives relying on "intuition," despite their intuition being constantly, wildly off-base! It’s funny enough when you’re watching from the sidelines, but when someone like this has even a shred of authority and tries to get involved with you, it’s a nightmare.

Just like this middle-aged guy.

“Listen here! If you decide who the criminal is based on a 'hunch,' you’re going to have as many criminals as you have investigators! Do you have any *evidence* that I’m the culprit?”

“If I had definitive evidence, I would have arrested you already! However! Various circumstances dictate that you are the perpetrator!”

“Oh ho! Then by all means, let's hear it! What 'circumstances' point to me being the criminal!?”

“Hmph! Still planning to play innocent at this stage? Fine! If you claim to have forgotten the many misdeeds you’ve committed, I shall refresh your memory!”

I don’t know what he meant by "this stage," but Wizer looked incredibly smug as he pulled a memo from his pocket.

“Approximately one month ago, when five-year-old Tom-kun went missing from Medert Village, what was found in a nearby wheat field but a massive footprint, presumably that of a Lesser Demon!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Lina Inverse’s handiwork!”

“...Huh...?”

The accusation was so sudden and illogical that my eyes went blank.

“And then, a few days later, when three-year-old Jesse-chan went missing from Farito Village, a massive creature was seen sticking its neck out of the lake facing the village! See! Lina Inverse’s handiwork!”

“...Hey...”

“And at the same time! When Mr. Bob of Lumafic Village was taking his five-year-old son, Rick-kun, down a road at dusk in a horse-drawn carriage, an orange light suddenly appeared in the night sky...”

“Hold it, old man.”

I leaned in close, looming over Wizer.

“...So what? You’re saying every weird incident in the world is my fault!?”

“Of course!”

Wizer answered without a moment's hesitation.

“Surely you won't claim to be ignorant of the various rumors surrounding yourself!?”

“...!”

...Well... yeah... I know I’m often called by nicknames like "The Bandit Killer" or "The

One even Dragons Step Over," and those aren't exactly without basis. I could easily imagine that those names get bundled with rumors that have grown "extra fins" or are entirely baseless.

“It is said! That you fire mysterious beams from your mouth to wipe out bandits! It is said! That tentacles grow from your forehead to prey on nearby flies!”

“WAIT JUST A MINUTE!”

“Could Lina Inverse, a woman constantly followed by such bizarre rumors, possibly be a normal human being!? No! Of course not! Therefore, if I say the various strange incidents in this world are Lina Inverse’s fault, no one will complain! My intuition as a Special Investigator told me so!”

“YOU’RE JUST FRAMING ME!!”

CRAAAASH!

My reflexive "Screw Kick" of rage sent Wizer flying into the neighboring table.

But Wizer was undeterred—in fact, he sat up with a defiant smirk.

“...Heh... So, realizing you can no longer talk your way out of it, you’ve resorted to force! That’s as good as a confession!”

“Anyone would get mad if you talked that much nonsense!”

“No! You were shaken because I hit the mark, and you lashed out! Did you think you could deceive the eyes of a Special Investigator with such a poor excuse!?”

“What 'Special Investigator'!? Do you think just because you have a fancy title, everything you say is correct!? If that’s the case, go get a brain transplant and come back later!”

“Hmph! How typical of a villain to act so high and mighty!”

“Who’s a villain!? Someone trying to pin a crime on an innocent person based on a 'hunch' is way more malicious!”

Wizer stood up, and our gazes locked, practically throwing sparks—

“Ho ho ho ho! It seems this match is my victory! Lina Inverse!”

Ignoring the situation and the stares of the people around us, the one who suddenly let out that familiar, idiotic laugh was, naturally, Naga the Serpent!

“Naga! You’re still here!?”

“...What do you mean 'still here'... You’ve been so cold lately, Lina...”

“And? Do you have something to say? I’m a bit busy here.”

“Hmph! It’s useless to try and distract me like that! At any rate, as we agreed, the bill

is on you! Understand!?”

...Gah! Dammit!

With Wizer’s appearance and his nonsensical accusations, I’d completely forgotten that Naga and I were in the middle of a speed-eating contest with the bill on the line! Looking over, I saw that Naga had already polished off ten Afternoon Tea Sets.

Ugh! If I lost a bet like this and was forced to pay the bill, it would be a shame upon my descendants! I have to talk my way out of this somehow!

“This is no time for that! I’m being framed for a crime I didn't commit!”

“Ho ho ho ho! If you think you can use that excuse to dodge the bill, you are sorely mistaken!”

—Tch! She read me!?

However, I didn't let my internal agitation show. I ignored Naga and turned back to Wizer.

“Anyway! I have no reason to listen to you when you have no grounds or evidence!”

“—Hey, Lina! The bill!”

“And first of all! There’s no reason for me to go around kidnapping kids, is there!?”

“Kidnapping children is a villain’s duty!”

“What kind of world do you live in!?”

“Don’t ignore me, Lina!”

“Regardless! If you’re going to call someone a criminal, at least gather some evidence and grounds first!”

“Fool! Do you not realize that it's *because* there is no evidence or grounds that I came here to shake you up directly!?”

“Don’t act proud of that!”

“THE BIIIIIIILLLL!”

“—KYAAAAAAAAA!”

The three-way argument between me, Naga, and Wizer—none of which was connecting with the other—was finally brought to a halt by a woman’s scream coming from outside the café.

“—What was that!?”

“It came from outside! Let’s go!”

“Lina! The bill!”

Wizer and I bolted out of the café. Naga tried to follow, but was stopped by a waiter.

YES! That means the bill is on Naga! Now I just have to clear Wizer's suspicions!

...Actually, that feels like it might be the bigger hassle...

"Wizer Freion, Royal Special Investigator! What happened!?"

Wizer's title seemed to work. He barked the question at a bystander, and the answer came immediately.

"...Someone... someone said a child was kidnapped!"

"What!? Which way!?"

"Toward the lake!"

At another person's shout, Wizer and I took off running at the same time.

True enough, this town faced an exceptionally large lake. From where we were running, I could see the sparkle of the blue water and the thick mist hanging over the offshore area.

"—Hey! Lina!"

A familiar voice chased Wizer and me from behind.

"You'd better pay the bill properly later! I had to cover for you!"

...Tch! That Naga! She's persistent!

"This isn't the time, Naga! Apparently, a child was kidnapped!"

"Hmph! You're just planning to use the confusion to make the bill disappear!"

...This woman... she's surprisingly sharp whenever money is involved...

"We can talk about that later! Right now..."

"There it is!"

At Wizer's shout, I scanned the area and saw a single shadow crossing the blue sky!

"A Lesser Demon!?"

I cried out.

Against the backdrop of the clear blue sky, flapping its wings toward the lake, was indeed a Lesser Demon. And in its arms was a child, maybe three or four years old.

—I'd heard that lower-level demons like Lesser Demons could grow wings and fly if necessary, but this was the first time I'd seen it with my own eyes.

But this wasn't the time for casual observation.

“You see that!? *That’s* the culprit!”

I shouted as I ran after it. Wizer, running alongside me, replied:

“That doesn't mean *you* aren't the one controlling that demon! Staging an incident using a minion while facing an investigator to divert suspicion... a common tactic!”

...This guy... he’s determined to make me the culprit no matter what...

“Lina! Stop trying to change the subject!”

“...I told you, this isn't the time!”

While arguing and thinking, we soon reached the shore of the lake.

But—at this rate, the demon would surely get away. I have a high-speed flight spell, but even if I used it to give chase, I wouldn't be able to cast any other significant spells while maintaining it. If the demon noticed my pursuit and attacked me in mid-air, I’d have zero chance of winning.

If I blasted the demon with offensive magic and my aim was slightly off, the child would be caught in the blast. Even if I managed to shoot down only the demon, the child would plummet straight down.

—In that case—

“Linaaaaaa! The billllll!”

“I told you, shut up!”

“—Hmph! Fine!”

Having finally accepted my rebuke, Naga tossed her hair back.

“In short, I just have to deal with this situation first, and *then* we can talk about the bill!”

As she spoke, she began chanting a spell.

—Wait, that chant... offensive magic!? Is she planning to knock the Lesser Demon out of the sky!?

For a split second, I considered stopping her with a kick, but I instantly shifted my thinking and began my own chant.

Soon, Naga’s spell was complete!

“*Gaav Flare!*”

An attack spell with excellent killing power even against demons. A bolt of red light shot from Naga’s palm, heading straight for the demon in the sky!

At the same moment, I triggered the spell I had finished chanting!

“*Ray Wing!*”

Using the high-speed flight spell, I flew parallel to Naga’s red light. My plan was to catch the child in mid-air the moment the spell shot down the Lesser Demon.

However, while this spell is active, the caster is surrounded by a wind barrier. If I approached the child like this, I wouldn't be helping—I’d probably blow them away.

—So, there was only one thing to do.

Right before my eyes, Naga’s *Gaav Flare* struck the Lesser Demon’s back, reducing it to nothingness. I dove beneath the child as they slipped from the demon’s grasp—

And I canceled my spell.

I reached out and caught the child in mid-air! Naturally, both of us continued falling toward the lake. The wind roared in my ears. The water's surface rushed toward us.

And then—the spell I had begun chanting the moment I canceled the first one was complete.

“*Levitation!*”

Our fall slowed softly. I floated in the air, holding the child, as if standing on the surface of the water.

“Well done!”

“You’re amazing, girl!”

Waiting for me back on shore were the cheers of the onlookers, and—

“You brat! How could you do something so dangerous!?”

“What would you have done if you’d hit the child!?”

“Eeeeek!?”

—and the sight of Naga being pummeled by a couple who seemed to be the child’s parents.

After returning the child to their parents and basking in the praise of the crowd for a while—

“Quite the performance, Lina Inverse.”

Wizer approached me with a sarcastic smile.

“...But judging by your face, you still seem to suspect me.”

“Hmph! Naturally! Causing a minor incident and then resolving it right in front of an investigator to gain trust and divert suspicion! Another common trick, but you cannot

deceive the eyes of this Special Investigator!”

“Your eyes are already clouded enough! —And besides!”

I pointed emphatically toward the center of the lake.

“If a Lesser Demon was trying to fly over there, wouldn't a normal person think there might be something over there!?”

“One cannot serve as a Special Investigator with only 'normal' thinking!”

“Being 'abnormal' isn't always a good thing! First of all! On this perfectly clear day, why is there a thick mist only in the middle of this huge lake!? Doesn't this blatantly suspicious situation bother you at all!? Did you even search the lake!?”

“Hmph! Trying to divert the conversation again! You probably anticipated being suspected and caused incidents in the villages and towns around the lake just to force us into a useless search!”

……

“...Hey...”

“What!?”

“...Are you saying these incidents only happened in the villages and towns facing this lake...?”

“Yes! What of it!?”

“...And... did you search this lake...?”

“No! I do not do useless things!”

……*Sigh*……

I let out a deep sigh from the bottom of my heart at Wizer’s words.

How can you leave a place this blatantly suspicious alone...? Normally...?

“...Are you just completely incompetent...?”

“What!? How rude! Despite how I look, I, Wizer, have a great reputation among the neighborhood housewives as the sharpest of all the Special Investigators!”

...If this guy is the "sharpest," then what on earth are the rest of this country’s investigators like...?

But anyway. At this rate, Wizer would persistently follow me until he "found" some non-existent evidence that I was the criminal.

I’m absolutely done with that kind of annoyance. Which meant there was only one way out.

“...Fine...” I said to Wizer with a sigh.

“Oh! Have you finally given up and decided to confess your crimes!?”

“Not a chance! In short, if I prove I’m not the criminal, you’ll be satisfied, right!?”

“Hmph! Don’t make me laugh! Prove you aren't the criminal? As if such a thing is possible!”

“Then I’ll just have to do it! I’ll find the real culprit who’s kidnapping the kids!”

“Hah! You’re probably planning to say you’re 'looking for the real culprit' and just run away, but I won’t fall for that!”

“Aaaagh! If you’re that worried, just come with me! I’ll gather all the evidence and testimony right in front of your eyes and find the real criminal! Will that satisfy you!?”

“A 'real criminal' who doesn't exist!? Hmph! Fine! I shall play along with this farce! You’re bound to slip up eventually!”

“Fine! I’ll make sure you regret this later!”

“...Lina... the bill...”

Ignoring Naga, who was still obsessing over the small details, Wizer and I locked gazes, sparks flying once again.

The investigation that followed was—to be honest—not that difficult. After all, there was a blatantly suspicious lake right there. If I kept asking around about it, information was bound to turn up.

Of course, there were many villages and towns of various sizes scattered around the lake, so questioning everyone would be a massive chore.

So—I started my questioning in a town that sat on the lakeshore but hadn't had a single incident yet.

On the day the three of us arrived in this town, the center of the lake was once again shrouded in mist. The questions I asked were simple: What’s in the middle of the lake, in the mist? Are there any boats that head out there regularly?

After asking around here and there, the results were quite interesting. According to the townspeople, there used to be a small island in the center of the lake. The mist appeared and the fishermen stopped going that far out a few months ago. As for regular boat trips, they didn't know anything.

On the other hand, the fishermen living right on the shore said: *We don't know. We don't know anything. We definitely don't know anything.*

“It’s like they’re screaming, 'There’s something going on here!'... isn't it...”

At an inn slightly removed from the lake, the three of us—Naga, Wizer, and I—sat

around a dinner table on the first floor to discuss our findings.

“Hah! Don’t make me laugh! Interpreting others' testimony in whatever way is convenient for you! Talk about a forced conclusion!”

“...You’re the last person I want to hear that from...”

“More importantly, Lina, I’d like you to finally pay that bill.”

……Well…… I highly doubt you could call this a "discussion," but...

“Anyway! When in doubt, investigate! Tomorrow we’ll rent a boat somewhere and actually head out to that island in the middle of the lake!”

“What a farce! But fine! Since I said I’d play along once, I’ll see it through!”

“More importantly, Lina, the bill...”

“Gah! You’re seriously persistent, Naga! Fine! Once we find the real culprit and their hideout, I’ll give you a bigger share of the treasure we seize!”

“You promise!? You won't say that and then sneak extra treasure away from me, will you!?”

“I won't, I won't.”

“...You two... don't discuss plans to rob criminals of their money in front of an investigator...”

“...Well, at any rate, tomorrow is an early day. Let’s get some rest tonight and head out first thing in the morning!”

—However. This plan was interrupted. Just as I had predicted.

CHUG-OOOOOON!

An explosion ripped through a room in the inn in the middle of the night. The explosion happened in a third-floor room—specifically, the room I was staying in.

“...Heh heh heh... Too easy.”

“I don't know who they are, but this is what happens when you start poking your nose into things...”

“Ho. Sorry for being so 'easy' to kill.”

“Wha-!?”

The two men hiding in the darkness of the alleyway looked up in shock at the voice coming from above. In the eyes of the masked men was the silhouette of me, Lina Inverse, hovering in the air with the crescent moon at my back.

“...Since you've been silencing the fishermen, there must be a large organization involved. If that’s the case, they were bound to make a move after I was asking

around so openly. ...Looks like I hit the jackpot."

"...You!? Weren't you in that room!?"

"When we were talking in the diner on the first floor, I noticed a blatantly suspicious guy at a nearby table. I figured something might happen tonight, so I pretended to go back to my room but stayed on watch in the sky. I didn't expect you to actually lob a *Fireball* into the room, though."

"—Tch!"

The men hurriedly began chanting. I canceled my *Levitation* spell, landed on a nearby roof, and started my own attack spell. The men finished their chants first.

"*Freeze Arrow!*"

"*Damu Brass!*"

They fired their attack spells up at me from the shadows below. But it was simple enough to duck behind the roof for cover. Of course, I couldn't see them well, and if I stuck my head out carelessly, I might get an attack spell right in the face.

But I knew a spell perfect for this situation.

—*Van Rail*—

The spell creates vines of ice that crawl along walls and surfaces from the caster's hand, freezing anything they touch. I'd use this to pin them down, then jump down and beat them until they confessed who they were working for. All's well that ends well.

I finished the chant and pressed my right hand against the roof—

"SO THIS IS WHERE YOU WERE! LINA INVERSE!"

"NYOEEEEH!?"

The voice right in my ear made me scream. I turned around to find—heaven knows how or when he got there—the useless investigator, Wizer.

"...Wh... Why are you here!?"

"Appearing where least expected is the hallmark of a Special Investigator!"

"...Ugh... whatever... more importantly! The guys who lobbed a *Fireball* into the inn are right down there!"

"Hmph! What a transparent lie! You likely fired an attack spell into your own room yourself, planning to disappear and make it look like you were killed by some mysterious third party! But the eyes of Special Investigator Wizer cannot be deceived by such a cheap trick!"

“...I... TOLD... YOU... it’s not a lie! Just look down at the alley...”

—*Just take a look at the alleyway*—

I was about to say it when I finally realized. The attack spells from below had stopped. And the presence of those two assassins had vanished.

“...Seriously... if you hadn't interfered, the case would have been settled by now, and I wouldn't have had to set sail this early in the morning...”

“Hah. Still planning to repeat yesterday’s excuses?”

“...Sigh... whatever, but you’ll at least let me eat a decent breakfast, right, Lina?”

—The morning after the attack.

The three of us were walking along the lakeshore while the morning mist had yet to clear. Of course, this wasn't some fancy "morning stroll." We were heading for the island in the middle of the lake while there were still no eyes around.

“But what are we going to do for a boat at this hour? I heard the fishermen haven't been heading out in the mornings lately... and if no one is awake, we can't negotiate to rent one.”

...*Sigh*...

I let out a heavy sigh at Wizer’s words.

“...Listen... doesn't it strike you as suspicious that the fishermen haven't been going out in the mornings lately? Don't you think anything of it?”

“Don’t underestimate me. Of course I do. I suspect Lina Inverse is deeply involved in this matter as well!”

...This guy... he ends up there every single time...

“...Well... that’ll all become clear once we get to the island. —And, about the boat... how about this one?”

I picked out a suitable-looking boat from the many tied up at the shore and gave it a couple of pats.

“...Wa... Wait a minute! 'How about this one'... didn't you get permission from the owner!?”

“Nope.” I gave him a simple nod.

—It was obvious. Some kind of pressure was being put on the people around here. If I asked to borrow a boat honestly, there was no way they’d just say yes. This was the only way.

“But... this is theft!”

“No, it’s not. It’s a temporary requisition for the purpose of assisting a Special Investigator’s investigation.”

—I was implicitly saying, *"If there’s any trouble, you take the responsibility,"* but I wonder if Wizer caught onto that.

“...B-But...”

“It’s not exactly praiseworthy, but every second the investigation is delayed is another second the kidnapped children are in greater danger. Is that okay with you?”

“Ugh...!? ...F-Fine...”

“Alright! Then we’re setting sail! Let’s go, everyone!”

Creak...

Splash...

The creaking of the oars and the sound of gentle waves hitting the hull. Occasionally, a splash from somewhere—probably a fish jumping. The mist hadn't cleared yet.

The boat we had "snatched"—I mean, "temporarily requisitioned"—was just a normal fishing boat, big enough for four or five people as long as there wasn't a catch of fish on board.

The oarsman was, of course, Special Investigator Wizer. Heavy labor in these situations is a man’s duty.

“...Are we... there yet...?”

“...With mist this thick, it’s hard to tell where that island is...” I said to Wizer, who hadn't stopped rowing.

In truth, looking around revealed nothing but the nearby water and the white of the mist.

“—Hmph. Let me tell you something, Lina Inverse. If you dragged me, Naga the Serpent, all the way out here and there’s nothing there...!”

SPLASH!

Naga’s voice was cut off by the sound of water. I turned around to find her gone, with only ripples on the lake’s surface.

“...Seriously... she probably puffed out her chest for no reason and fell overboard again...”

I muttered to myself, when suddenly—!

ZUBASHAAAAAA!

It burst through the surface of the water!

(To be continued in "Unjust Accusations"!)

Next Episode Preview

What was it that tore through the surface of the water and appeared before us?! What waits for us on that small island in the lake?! And will I be able to clear Wizer's suspicions?! Above all, will we actually manage to make even a little bit of profit this time?!

Whether or not all these various mysteries are solved next time is beyond my power to guarantee, but regardless, the next episode is: **"Unjust Accusation: Part Two"!**

Please wait for the next episode!

Unjust Accusations (Part 2)

Synopsis

I, Lina Inverse, have been placed under groundless suspicion as the culprit behind a string of child kidnappings by the "pea-brained" Special Inspector Wizer. To clear my name, Naga, Wizer, and I have begun an investigation to track down the true culprit!

Assassins attacked us along the way! And now, as the three of us head toward the small island in the lake—the suspected stronghold of the criminal—something has burst through the water's surface!

"Ngyaaaaahhh!?"

"What is this!?"

The voices of Naga and Wizer echoed across the misty water.

It was a single, giant tentacle. At the tip of it—looking like it belonged to neither octopus nor squid—was the coiled figure of Naga. I see. I thought she'd just fallen off the boat... but it turns out she was grabbed by this thing and dragged under.

"A Kraken!?"

At the sight of the tentacle, Wizer cried out in a voice mixed with terror and astonishment. It's a monster that lives in seas or large lakes, looking like a cross between an octopus and a squid. Stated like that, it might not sound very strong, but the scary part is the destructive power born of its massive size. It can crush a decent-sized ship with its tentacles as easily as anything. Naturally, the boat we're on wouldn't stand a chance if it took a direct hit.

The tentacle whipped back in a great arc and—*ping!*—tossed Naga right toward us!

Is it trying to sink the boat by slamming Naga into it?! However!

"Not so fast! **Diem Wind!**"

I immediately cast the high-wind spell, blasting Naga off in a completely different direction!

"Ugyaaaaaaa..."

Zababon.

The sound of splashing water came from a distance. Heh. Rest in peace, Naga.

"Hey, hey! Is that okay?! Doing that to your companion!?"

"Naga will be fine! You should worry about us instead!"

No sooner had I finished speaking than—

Zazazazazabaaah!

Surrounding our fishing boat, roughly ten giant tentacles rose from the water. All at once, they surged toward our vessel! I didn't have time to crush the tentacles closing in from all sides one by one with spells. On the other hand, I didn't have a spell that could deal direct damage to the main body, which was likely deep underwater.

—In that case—

"Here they come!"

While glancing at Wizer, who was shouting in a panic, I chanted a spell and—*pan!*—slapped my left palm onto the water's surface.

"**Sea Blast!**"

Zazawa!

In response to the "Words of Power" I released, the water surged violently. It’s a spell that creates a large wave on the surface. Naturally, something like this isn't going to do anything to a Kraken hiding underwater. But spells, like scissors, depend on how you use them. Attack spells aren't just for attacking!

I suppressed the power of that strike to a certain degree. Our fishing boat was carried away by the sudden wave and easily broke through the circle of tentacles!

Alright! Successful escape!

However, that was only a temporary measure. It wasn't a fundamental solution for dealing with the Kraken. In any case, if hitting the main body was difficult...

Zaa!

Kicking up waves, the Kraken’s tentacles closed in from behind.

"They're coming again! Do something!"

Without Wizer even needing to tell me, I was already chanting the next spell.

"**Levitation!**"

Zazaa.

The moment the spell activated, our boat rose into the air.

"Wh—Hey now!?"

"Hold on tight so you don't fall!"

The Kraken’s tentacles passed directly beneath the floating fishing boat.

"Are we running away!?"

"Defeating this thing isn't the goal! The important thing is investigating that island!"

"...But...! No, this won't do! If a thing like that is in the lake, the local fishermen will be in trouble! Knowing that, do you mean to just overlook it!?"

"...Well then, why don't *you* fight it...?"

"Right! Let's hurry onward!"

So saying, Special Inspector Wizer pointed sharply toward the island.

...Well... humans are usually like this...

"Alright. Now that we've settled that..."

Zazababaah!

A flashy sound of splashing water echoed around, cutting off my sentence.

"—What!?"

Shifting my gaze to the water below, I saw a cluster of tentacles stretching up toward our boat in the sky!

"—The Kraken is... floating up!?"

However, Wizer's words were only half-correct. As the tentacles stretched upward, a dark shadow appeared on the surface, and kicking through the water, *it* revealed its form!

—It wasn't a Kraken.

Ruguooooooooooon!

What roared across the lake was the cry of a Sea Serpent. From the middle of its torso, those tentacles were writhing and squirming, and it even had wings growing out of its back for good measure.

—Naturally, a weirdo like this doesn't just exist normally in the world.

"Wh—What is that!?"

"A Chimera! Probably made by the people on that island!"

Rigiooooooooon!

The Chimera gave one more cry, spread its wings, and flapped them grandly! Is it going to fly?! Either way, since it’s come to this, we have no choice but to fight!

While controlling the Levitation spell, I began to chant—

"**Delf Zork!**"

Zaju!

It took exactly one hit. The water blowing up from the surface turned into a single sharp blade, easily bisecting the Chimera!

However, it wasn't me who had released the spell. Cutting through the sound of the waves made by the sinking body of the Chimera, an all-too-familiar stupid laugh echoed!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! This is what happens when a mere Chimera dares to lay a hand on Naga the White Serpent! You can spend your time regretting it in the afterlife!"

Shifting my gaze toward the voice, there stood Naga on top of the water, hands on her hips!

"Naga! Why are you standing on the water!?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Isn't it obvious?! Just as I was about to drown after being 'received' by someone's **Diem Wind**, I was rescued by a passing Giant Water Jellyfish!"

...Oh. She's right. If you looked closely, beneath Naga's feet, a giant semi-transparent thing was bobbing along.

"Heh. Well, I suppose this is just a result of my personal virtue."

So saying, Naga puffed out her chest and acted all high and mighty.

...But... what kind of "virtue" leads to being saved by a passing jellyfish...?

...Well... I already knew she wasn't ordinary... in many senses of the word...

"At any rate! The fact that we're getting such unnatural interference is proof that someone is trying to keep us away from the island! Let's move in! To that island!"

I pointed, and beyond the mist, the faint silhouette of an island floated into view.

"—Someone is here—there seems to be no doubt about that..."

After the Chimera's attack, we landed on the island without any particular further interference. Even though it was called a "small island," it was about the size of a small city. In one corner, there was a pier and several ships.

However, Wizer turned a suspicious gaze toward me and said, "You say 'someone,' but... aren't these just fishermen's boats?"

...*Sigh*...

I let out a deep sigh at his completely off-mark remark.

"...Listen. Everyone was saying that the fishermen haven't been coming this far lately,

right? Besides, none of these boats look like they've been used much, and they aren't fishing boats to begin with."

"...Hrm... I see..."

Wizer stared intently at the moored ships for a moment.

"—I see... Between that Chimera from before and these ships... This is quite an elaborate cover-up operation, Lina Inverse."

"Nwaaaaaaah! You! You're determined to blame everything on me no matter what, aren't you!?"

"Of course! Haven't I been saying so from the start?! The overly sharp intuition and experience of Wizer tells me that you, Lina Inverse, are the culprit!"

"Where exactly is it 'sharp'?! Where?! ...Ugh, it's useless saying anything to you! Anyway! Let's save those accusations for after we finish investigating the island!"

"Hmph! Don't go making pathetic excuses just because nothing turns up!"

"Fine by me! But let me tell you, when I catch the real culprit, I'm going to make you get down on your hands and knees and apologize!"

"More importantly, Lina! Regarding my share after we defeat the villains—make sure to add extra for the time you blasted me away with your spell!"

Chattering away like that, we began to advance toward the center of the island.

—I didn't know where the entrance to the enemy hideout was, but if we made ourselves conspicuous on purpose, they might make a move from their side. If that happened, we wouldn't have to wander around looking for an entrance we couldn't find.

"—Anyway. There has to be an entrance or something near here. It might be hard to find in the mist, but keep a close eye on your surroundings—"

It happened suddenly. Before I could even finish my sentence, a bloodlust flared up nearby.

"!?"

Turning toward it, several red points of light appeared deep within the mist.

—Is that!?

Ruguooooooooo!

Simultaneously with a roar like a beast, the red points of light surged toward us! We leaped back instinctively. A split second later, a dozen or so fire arrows scorched the space where we had been standing just moments ago.

Kyu-kyu-gogogogogo!

"Ngyaaaaaaaaah!?"

...It seems about one person didn't escape in time...

Setting aside the small details, I began to chant a spell. However, before my spell could be completed:

"『—What is your business here—?』"

The man's voice came from the direction the fire arrows had flown from.

"—You pretty much know, don't you? Including the fact that what you're doing is evil. If not, you wouldn't be sending assassins to the inn or keeping a weird Chimera as a watchdog in the lake."

"『...I see... however, why stick your noses into this?』"

"It goes without saying! It's to take back the children who have been disappearing from all over!"

Wizer spoke toward the direction of the voice before I could open my mouth. Oh. It looks like he's finally understood the facts.

"No doubt you are an accomplice of Lina Inverse as well!"

...He hadn't.

"『...I don't know what you're talking about... but in any case, now that you've come this far, I can't let you leave in one piece...』"

At the signal of the voice, a single shadow slowly emerged from the depths of the white world.

A Lesser Demon.

I see. So it was this thing's doing that fired those fire arrows earlier.

—However, to send just one Lesser Demon—we're being quite looked down upon. Certainly, for an average warrior or mage, it might be a considerable threat, but it's far too outclassed to be an opponent for me, the warrior and genius sorceress, Lina Inverse.

"—Just one? You think you can do something to me with that?"

"『Heh heh heh... you're probably right.』"

Surprisingly, the voice answered my words quite easily.

"『—Provided, that is, if it were a *normal* Lesser Demon...』"

"You should stop with the boring bluffs. No matter how you look at it, it just looks like

a normal Lesser Demon."

"『True enough... even in terms of ability, it is no different from a normal Lesser Demon.』"

"...What are you trying to say...? Exactly."

"『I am saying its "nature" is different. Normal Lesser Demons are summoned from another world via spells. However, this is something we created after much research, using a certain "base"... —What do you think was our purpose for kidnapping the children...?』"

"...Wh—What...!?"

"You can't mean...!? You bastards!"

Wizer and I both let out cries of shock involuntarily.

"『Yes... we use children whose egos have not yet been established as a base and turn them into Lesser Demons. That is the research we are conducting. And the successful example is right before your eyes—that's what this is.』"

"That’s a pretty poor attempt at a bluff."

However, I immediately dismissed those words as a lie.

"『...Oh...?』"

"First of all, there's no need for you to do that. Lesser Demons were involved in most of the kidnapping cases. That means you, or one of your comrades, must be able to use Demon Summoning spells. If that's the case, there's no reason to go through the trouble and expense of kidnapping people to conduct that kind of research."

"『...Demons only obey the orders of the one who summoned them.』"

But the voice continued calmly, without showing any sign of panic.

"『In other words, they are nothing more than tools for the caster. However—if one could create a Demon that would listen to anyone, provided certain conditions were met—could that not be utilized as the ultimate army? In short, the military conversion of Demons. And the most suitable material for creating them was human children—that is the truth. You are free to dismiss it as a bluff, but once you have defeated that Demon, the corpse of a kidnapped child will be rolling right there before your eyes.』"

"...Tch...!"

Wizer and I both gritted our teeth involuntarily.

"『Now then. Enough talk—it's time for you to die. Do it!』"

Giooooooooooo!

The Demon roared in response to the voice. Before it, dozens of fire arrows appeared.

Wizer and I leaped back again. Although we somehow managed to dodge the arrows raining down all at once, the Demon called forth more fire arrows.

—Of course, if we just keep running, we'll eventually be cornered. Defeating a mere Lesser Demon is child's play, but if what the voice said was true, then this Demon was originally one of the kidnapped children. Even I would have a bad taste in my mouth after blowing something like that away.

"『Heh heh heh! What's the matter, what's the matter!? You can't achieve anything by just running around! Though, you won't be able to defeat that Demon anyway!』"

"Heh. Is that so?"

What I heard was—a voice I didn't particularly want to hear. And before Wizer or I could stop her:

"**Dynast Breath!**"

Gigaggiin!

The Demon's body froze solid in an instant, then shattered into white dust!

"Dwoaaaaaaah!?"

"You! How could you do such a thing!?"

Whether she heard our accusations or not, Naga struck her usual high-and-mighty pose.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Well? I defeated it for you! To spout such nonsense to Naga the White Serpent—you're ten years too early for that!"

"『...Im...Impossible!? How did you know it was a lie!?』"

At Naga's words, the voice sounded shaken... wait... a lie...!?

"—Wait a minute! So that story was a bluff after all!?"

"『...Tch...!』"

The voice left a single frustrated groan and was heard no more.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems they've realized the foolishness of challenging me and fled!"

"Hrm! Until just now, to be honest, I thought you were just an extra, but to see through that lie so easily—I, Wizer, am impressed!"

At Wizer's words, Naga puffed out her chest even more.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! ...What lie?"

"....."

Wizer and I were both left speechless.

"...No... I mean, the story about that Demon being made using a kidnapped child as a base..."

However, Naga just knitted her brows at Wizer's words.

—Wait, could it be...

"...I'll ask, Naga. Did you happen to get hit by the Demon's attack earlier and... were you perhaps unconscious?"

"Heh. That might have happened. When I came to, someone was running around, and some voice was arrogantly saying 'you won't be able to defeat this Demon,' so I just showed them I could defeat it easily."

"...I see... so it's a case of 'a lucky strike' as they say..."

"...Still... it's a good thing it was a bluff..."

Wizer and I both muttered with a sigh.

"—Anyway. This makes it clear that the enemy's facility is here. And probably—the kidnapped children too. That Demon just now was a bluff, but their goal is likely exactly what he said! Before the children are used as experimental materials, let's charge into the enemy camp and rescue them!"

Dudogaaaan!

The single attack spell I released easily pulverized the hideout's door, which had been hidden by a clumsy camouflage. Beyond the stairs leading underground, a white corridor illuminated by glow-moss stretched out. There was no sign of anyone around.

"Let's go!"

Calling out to Naga and Wizer, I ran down the stairs and sped through the corridor. —Usually, at this point, spears would fly out from the walls or pit traps would open in the floor—that’s the common sense for a villain's hideout. But for some reason, this facility didn't seem to have any such traps set. Maybe they didn't have a hobby for setting traps, or maybe they were just overconfident that no one would ever break in this far—

...Well... in a country where someone like Wizer is a Special Inspector, I suppose I can understand why they'd want to be overconfident...

As the three of us proceeded down the corridor for a while:

"『So you've come this far after all.』"

The voice heard from nowhere was the same one we’d heard back in the mist.

"What!? Where are you!? Show yourself!"

Wizer stopped and looked around restlessly.

"Calm down. There's probably a speaking tube or something somewhere."

"『A keen observation. —But since you've come this far, I suppose we have no choice but to settle this.』"

"Heh... surprisingly decisive, aren't you?"

"『Now that it's come to this, we and you have no choice but to reach a conclusion. Let's both put aside the petty tricks. Proceed straight down the corridor, turn right, and enter through the first door. I am in that room as well. We will settle things there.』"

"Okay. We're coming."

"—Wait a minute! No matter how you think about it, it's a trap!"

"I know that without you telling me," I answered Wizer's words easily with a smile. "That's why—we're going."

"...How reckless..."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Lina! It seems you've finally come to understand 'aesthetics'!"

Naga flipped her cloak pointlessly with a *basaa* sound.

"Even knowing it is a trap, to dare to charge into enemy territory and still emerge victorious! That is what a true... Hey, Lina! Don't just go off by yourself!"

Ignoring the nonsense and protests, I moved forward, with Naga and Wizer hurriedly following behind. Eventually, our group arrived before a single door, just as the voice had instructed.

"—Hey! Are you seriously going in!?"

Regardless of Wizer's persistent nagging, I chanted a spell.

"**Vu Vraimer!**"

Gogogogogo!

In response to my spell, the stone walls of the corridor writhed and shifted, giving birth to a stone Golem. I stood the stone Golem, which was large enough to almost fill the corridor, directly in front of the door—and I opened the door!

At that moment!

Kyu-kyu-gogogogogogogo!

Dozens—no, perhaps as many as a hundred fire arrows struck the Golem's body!

As I thought, they were waiting inside!

Catching a moment when the attack subsided, I took a quick look inside. It looked like it might have been a warehouse or something; it was a fairly large space with no other doors besides this one. There were about ten figures in mage robes and a dozen or so weird Chimeras. I see. Their plan was to concentrate their forces here and intercept us.

Alright!

Having confirmed the contents of the room, I closed the door without hesitation and gave the Golem its next command.

"Sit in front of this door with your back to it and make sure no one can come out from inside!"

Secret Technique: Pretending to Accept a Duel to Imprison the Enemy's Main Force!

"『Wait a minuteeeee!』"

That voice was heard again from a speaking tube hidden somewhere.

"『Weren't we supposed to settle things here!?』"

"I said 'we're coming,' but I didn't say 'we'd settle things.' —Besides, you're the one who lied in the first place. You weren't in this room. ...Anyway, you probably intended to leave us to the others while you watched safely from a distance."

"『...On... On what grounds!?』"

"Simple. Because there were no Demons in the room."

"『.....』"

"Judging from what happened above ground, you should be the one summoning and controlling the Lesser Demons. If you really were in this room, you would have summoned one or two Demons to bolster your forces, even if just a little. Despite that, there wasn't a single Demon—which means you aren't there. Furthermore, combining that with your idea of trying to deal with us in this room—it means you are further in. We're coming for you now, so you'd better be ready. —So, with that said, let's go! You two!"

"Uhm!"

"—Wait, Lina, what about the treasure!?"

"You can ask the owner of the voice later!"

"Heh! Then let's go at once!"

Leaving the Golem in place, we ran further into the corridor. We flung open the doors lined up one after another to check inside. If there was nothing, we moved to the

next door. After repeating that a few times—the moment we opened a certain door:

Wun!

"Wowa!?"

A bundle of fire arrows passed right before my eyes. If I had taken half a step more, I would have taken a direct hit to the face.

"Don't move!"

The voice, heard without a moment's delay, was not through a speaking tube this time. Looking into the room, there was an iron door at the back. And before it stood a single, scrawny, middle-aged mage, with a Lesser Demon standing beside him.

"...I see... so you're the boss here..."

"I said don't move!"

With a hint of fear on his face, the mage put his hand on a lever of some sort installed next to the iron door.

"The children are all inside this door! However! What do you think will happen if I pull this lever!?"

"**Ragna Blast!**"

Chubabon!

Waiting for the mage's nonsense to end, the attack spell I released returned the Lesser Demon to nothingness.

"—Nothing will happen even if you pull that lever—I'm certain that's just a bluff too."

"...Wh..."

The mage stood there speechless at my flatly delivered words.

"From your perspective, the children are 'valuable experimental materials.' People who haven't even built a single trap in their facility—in other words, people who haven't even considered that someone might break in here—I don't think they'd have some strange mechanism in the room where they're keeping the children."

"『...I see... well then... I suppose I must admit my defeat here...』"

Despite being completely cornered, the mage spoke those meaningful words. For some reason, there was even a slight hint of composure on his face.

"However... remember this. This is not the end."

"No. This is the end."

Stepping forward with an incredibly arrogant attitude was Wizer.

"What you were trying to do has been witnessed and heard by the traveling sorceress Lina Inverse here, and by me, Special Inspector Wizer."

"...Wh—What...!? Special Inspector!? Foolish! There's no way such a person could be here!"

...Hmm...?

"Whether it's possible or not, the fact remains that I am here. At any rate, now that everything has come to light, no matter how many lies you pile up from now on, no helping hand will come from anywhere."

...Huh...?

This time, for real. At Wizer's words, the mage slumped down with an expression of despair.

—And so. The evil ambition was thwarted, and the captured children were safely rescued.

...Though there was no treasure at all...

"...Still... you really set me up, didn't you..."

It was a few days later, in the corner of a certain eatery, that I spoke to Wizer, who had come to visit, while wearing a wry smile.

"Hmm? Whatever do you mean?"

Sipping herbal tea with an innocent face, Wizer continued to play dumb.

"This incident—the one behind it was the Kingdom of Ruvinagald itself, wasn't it?"

At my casually spoken words, Wizer and Naga's movements froze for an instant.

"—If not the kingdom, then at least someone very close to the heart of the country. Judging from the pressure on the fishermen, there's no doubt that someone with great power was behind that incident. The fact that the facility's security was full of holes, and that mage's line, 'There's no way a Special Inspector could be here'... You can't spout a line like 'there's no way' unless you have a lot of confidence. In other words, the one behind them was a person or organization capable of putting pressure on the kingdom's Special Inspectors—"

"Wait a minute, Lina. If that's true, why would this country have to do something as stupid as kidnapping its own children to turn them into Demons?"

"Think about it, Naga. This country can't be a trade hub, and it has no particular tourist attractions. Its only famous product is the Ruvinagald cedar used for ships. Even with that cedar, it's not like they're making a huge profit, and if they keep cutting them down, they'll eventually run out. If that's the case, unless they take

some measures before then, the country will only continue to decline. I think the measure they came up with was the creation of Demons that anyone could control. ...Whether they intended to sell them to other countries or use them in their own country to start a war somewhere, I don't know that much. If they kidnap children from other countries, there's a possibility that investigations would follow. That would be an international problem. So, it's easier to cover it up if they kidnap children from within their own country. Even if a Special Inspector tries to move, if pressure comes from the kingdom itself, there's nothing they can do. Isn't that right, Mr. Special Inspector?"

"...Hmm—?"

Wizer looked away when asked.

"—At that time, you said to the mage, 'No helping hand will come from anywhere.' In other words, you knew—or suspected—that they had supporters at the national level. If so, if you proceeded with the kidnapping investigation, it was inevitable that pressure from above would follow. That's when you happened to learn that I had stopped by this country and decided to label me the culprit with your reckless logic. By doing this, the people 'above' wouldn't think of putting pressure on you while you were conducting an 'off-target investigation.' In that way, you successfully set things up so that I would chase the incident and you would follow. The reason you interfered when I cornered the attackers at the inn was because you feared that if I caught some low-level assassins, they would just 'cut off the tail' to protect themselves... Looking back, there are many other things that seem to fit. In short, you pretended to be incompetent and used me perfectly. As you said yourself, the local reputation of being the sharpest Special Inspector wasn't entirely a lie, was it?"

"...Wait... Wait a minute, Lina. Does that mean we..."

I gave a quick shrug of my shoulders at Naga's words.

"Yep. We were successfully made to cooperate with the investigation for free. Right, Wizer-san?"

"Hmm. I'm not quite sure what you're talking about."

Even as he said that, his eyes were definitely smiling. I let out a small smile.

"...Well... if you're going to keep playing dumb, let's leave it at that. But since we cooperated in solving the case, you'll at least treat us to a meal here, right?"

"Well, I suppose I can manage that much."

At Wizer's words, Naga and I looked at each other and broke into a grin. Needless to say, that day, Naga and I ate and drank so much that Wizer was reduced to tears trying to stop us.

—Oh, right.

I'll just mention one last thing: later, following condemnation from other countries, the involvement of the state in this incident came to light, and the royal house of Ruvinagald was dissolved.

For now, all's well that ends well.

...I didn't end up with any income, though...

(Unjust Accusations: End)

Night of the Assassins

Creak... creak...

A wind mixed with snow beat against the tightly closed windows and doors. Every time the wooden panels shuddered in the wind, Mr. Carlson, seated in the middle of the room, flinched and trembled slightly. He was a slightly heavyset middle-aged man with hair just starting to show streaks of white. It wouldn't be flattery to call his face that of a good person, but right now, his expression was glued with nothing but an expression of pure terror.

“Please calm down, Mr. Carlson.”

At my words, the man turned his frightened gaze toward me and asked:

“...Are we really... really going to be okay!?”

“We’ll be fine. As long as you don't panic and do something strange, that is.”

Saying that, I nodded with plenty of confidence.

—To be honest, I didn't actually have *that* much confidence... After all, the person targeting Mr. Carlson's life was, apparently, a professional assassin.

It seems the notice of assassination from the assassin calling himself Gizarmet had arrived at his place about ten days ago. The scheduled day of execution was—today. Hurriedly, he gathered strongmen and skilled fighters from the town to form a guard unit—and among them, a traveling sorceress who just happened to be in town at the time—namely, me, Lina Inverse.

It wasn't a job I particularly liked, but because the compensation was quite extraordinary, and the days for guarding were limited, in the end, I decided to take the job.

In cases like this, the situation won't be resolved unless you do something about the person who requested the assassination in the first place, but there were far too few clues to track them down. Mr. Carlson and Mr. Frank are partners in business, and in order to expand the guild, they’d occasionally done some rather unscrupulous things—according to the person himself, so in reality, they likely did some *quite* nasty things.

If that's the case, there must be as many people as there are stars who hold a grudge against Mr. Carlson. Rather than searching for each one, it’s faster to capture the assassin who shows up and make him confess the client's name.

...Well... if Mr. Carlson gets killed easily because of that, there's not much we can do.

“Don’t worry, big brother. Geez. With this many guards, one or two measly assassins are nothing.”

The one who spoke in a relatively relaxed tone was the man standing beside Mr. Carlson—his younger brother, Mr. Frank. I suppose one should expect it from brothers, but they certainly did look similar, and their ages couldn't be that far apart. He seemed like the take-charge type who often meddles; he’d been voicing his opinions regarding the deployment for the defense as well.

“...I'd appreciate it if you didn't panic unnecessarily, but I'd also appreciate it if you didn't get careless.”

“What?”

At my words, Mr. Frank glared at me with a somewhat miffed expression.

“It's best not to underestimate professional assassins,” accepting his gaze head-on, I said flatly.

Of course, professional assassins range from top-tier to bottom-tier, and among them, there are those who’d independently have a heart attack and eliminate themselves, but that is merely the exception among exceptions. After all, the opponents are people who've spent their daily lives training to eliminate their intended target—I really don't know what they’re finding enjoyable about leading such lives, but that's the kind of group they are.

True, in terms of numbers, we have over twenty guards on our side. In contrast, the opponent is one, or at most two or three people. However, on our side, even if we have the numbers, in the end, we're just a gathered mob. Excluding me, most of them are not much better than the thugs around here.

Take this room, for instance. Besides me, Mr. Carlson, and Mr. Frank, there are about five guards hired from the town, but just scanning them and judging from their movements, they are all small frys who are just hanging swords from their waists. Against a professional, just how reliable can such people be...?

Still, stating that here might end up simply terrifying Mr. Carlson unnecessarily.

“Are you saying this defense is insufficient?”

Perhaps, even while feigning relaxation, he was internally on edge, because Frank asked in a combative tone. I smiled brightly and replied:

“Carelessness is forbidden—isn't it?”

“...Well... that is true, but...”

With an expression that was somewhat disarmed, Frank answered ambiguously.

“I just wanted to say that.”

“If that's all then...”

“Shh!”

Cutting off his words, I strained my ears. I didn't hear anything particularly unusual. However—this *presence*—

“...He's come...”

A rustle...

At my small whisper, the guards in the room stirred in agitation.

...This might be... a bit of a hassle... I whispered to myself internally.

—I say this not as a boast, but for most opponents, I can detect them by their presence if they get close. But this time—I cannot sense the opponent's presence at all. In other words, the opponent is skilled enough to hide their presence almost completely.

If I cannot sense their presence, why was I able to detect an anomaly—the answer is simple. They are disappearing. The presences of the deployed guards. One after another.

...As I thought... they are even less reliable than I expected... the others... although I hadn't expected much from them to begin with...

And then. The presence of the guard who had been outside the door vanished completely.

“**Damu Brass!**”

Gagooaan!

Attack first, finish later, no questions asked. The moment the presence vanished, I released the spell I had chanted toward that location! The single blast pulverized the door and smashed down a part of the adjacent wall. Thick dust billowed up.

Of course, I didn't think I could defeat the opponent with this, but if I was lucky, I might be able to inflict some damage.

“Milady Lina!?”

“What do you think you're doing!?”

“It’s an enemy! Outside the door! Mr. Carlson, don't move!”

I snapped at the flustered Mr. Carlson and the others. The reason I told Mr. Carlson not to move was also because of something else. It hadn't been decided that the opponent was alone. If the opponent was multiple people, there was a high possibility that the

one at the door was a diversion.

Several of the guards ran toward the smashed door and—

“—Gah!?”

“Guoh!?”

The screams rose from the direction of the door. The heavy sound of the guards collapsing. And deep within that dust, a black human silhouette loomed indistinctly.

“—Hiiieee.” Mr. Carlson let out a small scream in terror.

I pulled out the short sword at my waist and began chanting a spell under my breath—

“—Standing there—might you be Milady Lina Inverse?”

The voice emitted by the shadow sounded familiar.

“That voice... could it be!?”

Slowly emerging from within the fading dust was a single man in assassin attire.

“—Gizan...?”

“Indeed. A chance meeting.”

At my stunned question, he quietly nodded.

In a certain country, there was a single, nameless village. Once, it had been built as an assassin training facility, and now, it was a village that had been ordered to abandon that path. The village sought a way to be self-sufficient—and it was in that incident that I had become acquainted with this man before me, Gizan. The man who was once feared as "Gizan of the Lightning," and now was supposed to be called "Gizan, Public Relations Section Chief, Village Revitalization Promotion Committee"—

“An acquaintance!? You don't mean you're in on it with him!?”

“...In on it... talk about a nasty insinuation... —By the way, Gizan, hadn't you retired as an assassin?”

“Indeed. That is precisely why I have come. To prevent Gizarmet.”

“Prevent...? What do you mean?”

“Uhm. As you know, our village is currently right in the middle of breaking free from the path of darkness and groping for a new path. And further, you must know that there are those within the village who object to that.”

“Wasn't all that settled in the previous incident?”

“Mostly, yes. But it was not complete. Even now, there are those who do not look kindly upon the village walking a different path. Gizarmet is likely one of them. If he were to undertake someone's assassination and succeed, all the ‘image improvement’

we've been doing until now would be for naught. Even without that, the village revitalization is not quite on track, and on top of that, if something like this were to happen, it would be fatal. It is precisely to prevent that that I have come here, that's what it is."

"...I see~... I can certainly understand the circumstances... But in that case, why on earth did you go knocking down all the guards who were already deployed, one after another?"

"That was unavoidable."

"Unavoidable?"

"Uhm. Out of kindness, I erased my presence, stood behind them, and simply asked, 'Need some help?' and for some reason they attacked me. I had no choice, so I had everyone go to sleep right there."

"Don't sneak up behind people out of kindness!!! In this situation, if you do something like that, naturally they'll attack you! That's normal!"

"...Hmm... Is that so... The world is a dangerous place..."

"The dangerous one is *you*!"

"But, in our village, we were taught from generation to generation that when visiting someone's house, this is how it must be done..."

"I'm telling you that that's no good! ...Geez... Oh well! What's done is done, and it's not like *I* suffered any harm. —By the way, that Gizarmet guy, since he's from the same village as you, you must know his methods. What kind of tricks does he use?"

"Uh. Regarding that... his street name within the village is 'Gizarmet of the Illusion.' A few simple spells, a bit of sword skill—that kind of level. If we fought him head-on, he would certainly never get the better of us... but he uses irregular attacks that even we, his comrades, cannot predict. In that sense, caution is required, indeed."

"I see... At any rate, it's encouraging that you'll lend a hand. Well then, if that's settled..."

"...Wait... wait a minute!"

To me, proceeding smoothly with the talk, Mr. Frank called a halt.

"Don't decide arbitrarily! In the first place... can we trust that man!?"

"We can trust him. Both in terms of ability and motivation."

"But... he's from the same hometown as this Gizarmet guy? It might be that at a critical moment, his follow-through gets weak..."

"There is no need to worry about that."

At Mr. Frank's mutter, Gizan himself shook his head left and right.

“We also approach this with sufficient determination. I also am one who was given the position of Section Chief of the Village Revitalization Promotion Committee. If so, preventing Gizarmet's actions that hinder the village revitalization is my natural mission! If our strength should fall short, and we are completely done in by that fellow, I approach this with the determination to take responsibility and self-destruct along with him and the mansion!”

“““““***Don't self-destruct!!!***”””””

Everyone present, excluding Gizan, voiced their correction in unison.

“...Somehow... I'd appreciate it if he would take his leave, if possible...”

At Mr. Carlson's worried face, I replied with a solemn expression:

“...Do you really think he'd go back politely if you said that...?”

“...No... I feel like saying it is useless...”

“Precisely.”

At my definitive words, Mr. Carlson just remained silent, wearing a bitter expression.

Thus, with a man in assassin attire mixed in among the various guards, a defense unit that looked somewhat strange, to say the least, came to be formed. Not that the formation had changed drastically. Gizan had merely been added to Mr. Carlson's direct guard unit. Even so, the fighting force was considerably strengthened with this. Now all that remained was to wait for the opponent to show up! Tension and silence once again descended upon the mansion.

Time flowed.

More flowed.

Morning arrived.

...Hey...

“...He didn't come, did he...”

Mr. Carlson muttered softly with a completely dumbfounded expression.

“Ah... he didn't come, did he...”

Mr. Frank chimed in absent-mindedly.

“...I hope this isn't the case... but surely you haven't misread the date on the notice, doing something so stupid as that?”

While managing to crack my heavy eyelids open with willpower, I asked. Mr. Carlson

also blinked his sleepy eyes and replied:

“...No... there is no mistake... The date on the notice was certainly today... no, is it yesterday now? It was yesterday's date. Perhaps... it was just a mere harassment...”

“—Wrong!”

It was Gizan’s voice that flatly interrupted Mr. Carlson's words.

“Uhmmm! That one! He does well! As expected of Gizarmet of the Illusion! Sending an assassination notice, not going on that day, and while our tension slackens and a gap opens in our defense, he strikes at that weak moment! Though a traitor, for now, let us praise it as a fine strategy!”

...Is that really how it works...? Truly...?

Well, in any case—

“...It seems this is likely going to be a long-term battle...”

At my soft murmur, everyone present in the room wore a truly distasteful expression.

“...Aah... hmm...”

Still rubbing my sleepy eyes, I stepped outside the mansion around the time when noon had passed slightly. After waiting up all morning for Gizarmet, I took a temporary nap. And in the end, it was this time. Since we didn't know when the opponent would arrive, we had decided to keep watch on a rotation system, so I was scheduled to watch the garden from noon today.

Scattered around the area were guards who looked exceptionally unmotivated, standing at intervals. Perhaps because of the snow that had fluttered last night, even now at noon, the air was exceptionally cold. First, let's circle around the front entrance...

“Yahoo.”

The woman's voice came from the direction of the main gate. Looking that way, she must have been in her early twenties, a woman with long, wavy blonde hair and dressed in flashy red clothes, was winking at a guard standing near the main gate.

“I’m here.”

“You shouldn't just be 'here', YOU FOOL!!!”

Doooshi!

Completely without any warning, and having appeared seemingly from nowhere, Gizan's kick landed directly on her head!

“...What!?”

Not quite understanding the circumstances, I hurriedly ran closer.

“...Atatata...”

The woman who had taken the kick and fallen down rubbed her head as she sat up, then stopped and froze in that pose as her eyes landed on Gizan.

“...Section Chief...?”

She knew Gizan's title!?

In that case—

“First, let us praise you for doing well. Deliberately not coming on the notified day, and while we braced for a long-term battle and changed our defense layout, striking at our weak moment from the front. However, that you did not notice my presence was your carelessness. Death to the failure and the traitor! Surely you haven’t forgotten our village’s code—I mean, custom!?”

Saying that, *sucha!* He drew a knife from his pocket.

“Hiiieee! Wait a second!”

“No questions asked...”

“Hold it!”

Not hers, but my raised voice of restraint stopped Gizan's movement completely.

“—What is it? Right now, I am rather occupied.”

“...No well... that woman, by any chance...”

At my question, Gizan nodded without taking his eyes off the woman, and said:

“Uhm. This one is Gizarmet of the Illusion. Margarita Gizarmet.”

The interior of the room was filled with a thoroughly tense atmosphere. —Well, having an assassin who had been targeting the owner's life right in front of them, there was no way they could talk with a calm atmosphere.

Right in the center of the vast room sat Mr. Carlson on a large chair, with Mr. Frank standing beside him. Facing them were me and Gizan, with the bound Margarita caught between us. The room was surrounded on all four sides by guards. For now, since I had been of the opinion that there were various things I wanted to ask, Gizan had limited himself to tying her up securely—and thus, we had brought her to this room.

“...A...aha, I got caught.”

Trying to laugh it off with a strained smile, she attempted to deflect. Naturally, that wasn't going to soften the atmosphere in this place. She tilted her head slightly and looked towards Mr. Carlson and the others, and asked:

“...By any chance... are you angry?”

“““***OF COURSE WE ARE!!!***”””

The angry roars of Mr. Carlson and Mr. Frank chimed in perfect unison.

“Aah! I’m sorry! ...It’s true that I promised to come yesterday, but it was snowing last night and it was cold.”

...So *that's* the reason she didn't come...? She is...?

In that case... could it be...

“...Let me ask you... Margarita.”

“I’d be happy if you called me Mari, I think.”

“Well then, Mari, the fact that you showed up openly in broad daylight today...?”

“Geez. Because I was bored. And I never thought Gizan-san would be here...”

—This... this woman...!

Just in case, I asked one more question.

“...Hey... was your acceptance of this assassination... out of rebellion against the village's policy?”

At my question, she shook her head side to side, "No," and replied:

“Because I could get lots of money.”

“Aaaaaah! I knew it!”

I involuntarily held my head. Gizan had evaluated her as an opponent who used irregular techniques... but if my imagination was correct, isn't she just a selfish, whimsical woman who takes the world for granted!?

“Huh? What is wrong? Milady Lina?”

“...No... it’s nothing, it's nothing...”

To Gizan who was asking with knit brows, I waved my hands back and forth and answered.

“The problem now is, who on earth asked her for Mr. Carlson's assassination.”

“True. It is necessary to make that clear.” Frank nodded at my words, and asked:

“Well then! You'll confess! Who is the client!?”

“...Tha...that is...” Mari looked at Mr. Frank and—

“.....”

Without answering the question, *fui!* she silently looked down.

“Hoh... so you don't intend to speak?”

Pipipiku!

At Gizan's small murmur, she trembled slightly and lifted her face, asking:

“...U...um... Gizan-sama, surely not...?”

“If you will not speak, then we will make you. You know what happens to those who are captured, don't you?”

“Nihieeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

“—Wait. Gizan-dono, or whatever you are.”

The voice of restraint was called by Carlson, who until then had maintained silence.

“If you are thinking of torture or something like that, sorry, but could you rethink that?”

“Big brother!? What are you saying!? That woman is the one who came targeting your life!”

“That may be true... but I completely refuse to have torture or whatever done here, having noisy screams raised, or having my furniture stained with blood. Besides, tormenting a woman doesn't suit my taste.”

“Hooom... but, in that case, what should we do...” Gizan thought about it when told.

“Well then here, how about just handing her over nicely to the officials?”

At Frank's suggestion, Mr. Carlson shook his head side to side, "No," and said:

“No, that's also bad. Whomever asked her for my assassination, if they learn that this woman has been captured, they'll release the next assassin. Here we should simply confine her in this mansion for a while.”

“Too dangerous! If she escapes and comes targeting your life again, what then!?”

“There is no need to worry about that. After all, we have—a professional on our side.” Mr. Carlson eyed Gizan slightly, and continued:

“More importantly, if we do nothing but remain alert and keep confined in the mansion, it will interfere with business. To tell the truth, I’d like to return to work even as soon as tomorrow. As long as the mastermind doesn't know this woman has

been captured, they probably won't make their next move immediately.”

Saying that, he rose from his seat, *tsukatsukatsuka!* walked over to Mari, peered intensely into her eyes, and said:

“—So that is how it is. We will see how things go for a while, but if there is no progress in the situation—we will also need to think about what to do with you. That is how it is. Understand.”

“Hii...” Cowed by Carlson, Mari let out a pitiful voice that was neither a reply nor a groan.

“And thus, guarded ones, it's a great effort but I would like you to continue to remain at the mansion. Of course for that part, I will add extra to the request fee, and I will provide rooms for sleeping and staying.”

Looking around the room, Mr. Carlson said.

...Uoomyu... it seems this incident is indeed likely to be prolonged... Externally, I let out a melancholy sigh.

—However. My prediction of the incident being prolonged was, seemingly easily, betrayed the following night.

Dudogaaan!

“—What!?”

At the sudden loud noise and impact, I leaped out of bed. The room I was staying in was one room on the second floor of Mr. Carlson's mansion. Flinging the window open and leaning out to look, thick explosive smoke was rising from one room on the second floor, slightly removed. —That room!

I hurriedly wrapped my cloak around me, grabbed my short sword, left the room, and headed over there. The explosion had occurred in the room where Mari was supposed to be confined.

Several people, guards and live-in servants, were already gathered around the problematic room. The door was blown outwards from the inside, and the interior of the room was blackened by the explosion. A part of the wall was also collapsed.

“Dammit! That woman! Did she escape!?”

One of the guards raised a curse and ran off towards downstairs. He probably intended to set up a search with everyone else and find her—

Wrong.

That explosion just now, was definitely not something she did. To break through the window and door from the inside, no idiot would cause an explosion strong enough to

make the room blackened. If they wanted to commit suicide that’s a different story.

Having escaped by some method, then exploding the room was also impossible. It’s better that her having escaped is noticed as late as possible. If that's the case, there's no reason to voluntarily cause a commotion.

If Mari didn't do it, the answer is one. Someone had tossed explosives into the room from the outside. Probably—a second assassin.

To the mastermind, Mari who had been captured was useless—worse than useless, she was nothing other than a hindrance who might spill the mastermind's true identity. It wouldn't be strange at all if they tried to eliminate her.

But if that's the case, the second assassin wouldn't just dispose of her and go home.

Then, the one to be targeted is—

“Where is Mr. Carlson!?”

At my frantic tone, the servant A I questioned replied while somewhat flustered:

“...He’s likely, resting in his own room...”

I didn't listen to the end, turned on my heel and sprinted off. His room should have been one room on the top floor—the third floor.

I ran up the stairs—

“Guaa!?”

A man's painful groan came from the end of the corridor, right when I finished climbing the stairs. Chanting a spell, I sprinted down the dark corridor, illuminated by the faint light of a lamp. One man was collapsed in the corridor. Probably the owner of the scream just now—likely one of the guards.

And beyond him—

—There he is!

A single black human silhouette turned the corner at the end and vanished. I couldn't capture his presence. Is this guy also a professional assassin?

“*Freeze Arrow!*”

As I turned the corner chasing the silhouette, I fired one shot of the spell. It was a preemptive countermeasure, and if it hit I’d be lucky, but there was no longer that silhouette there. Did he enter some room!?

...Mr. Carlson’s room wasn’t supposed to be this way, though...?

I stopped right there and began chanting the next spell under my breath. If the opponent suddenly leaped out, I’d blast him without any questions asked!

—However, before my spell could be completed:

“Is Mr. Carlson safe!?”

“Hey! Someone’s collapsed!”

Multiple voices and footsteps were approaching from behind.

—This is bad!

Damu!

The door of one room facing the corridor opened with a loud noise. As I thought! Stimulated by the voices and footsteps, he came out!

He was in typical assassin style, with his entire body excluding his eyes covered completely by a black cloth.

“*Fireball!*”

Simultaneously with kicking the door open, the assassin threw a red light sphere toward me!

At the same time, I kicked off the floor. Not sideways or backwards, but forward.

“What!?”

Perhaps this was unexpected, as the assassin let out a flustered voice. Basically, *Fireball* won't explode unless it makes contact with something. The flying fire sphere, I dodged it by a hair's breadth, and charged toward the opponent!

—It was simultaneous.

“**Bram Blazer!**”

Between me releasing the spell I had chanted, and—

Dugooooooooooon!

—the *Fireball* the assassin had released exploding far behind me—at the end of the corridor.

And—

Damu!

—between the assassin who had kicked the window open throwing his body out into the night sky.

—What!?

The spell I released swept vainly through the air, and I was thrown down by the explosive blast and heat wave striking from behind. Rising up, I hurriedly ran to the window the assassin had jumped out from—

Only a single rope, hooked with a grapple to the window frame, was swaying in the night wind. Just below where the rope hung, a window on a room on the second floor was open.

“What!?”

“Another killer!?”

“Where is he!?”

“Downstairs!?”

The guards who had come crowding in, seeing the rope hanging from the window and the open window on the second floor, hurriedly went back toward the stairs.

...Hmm... Something... seems off...

I peered inside the room the assassin had jumped out from. A large room of luxurious construction. The furniture and decorations were also quite splendid. It couldn't be a room for servants or guards. It was likely Frank's room. Nobody was visible in the room, but judging from the bed in the corner being disheveled, he must have been awakened by the initial explosion and left the room.

...In that case... could it be...?

I spun around on my heel and sprinted off. Heading toward Mr. Carlson’s room.

Batamu!

With a loud noise, I threw the door open. Inside the room were only Mr. Carlson and Mr. Frank, who was standing beside him. None of the other guards had come here, perhaps absorbed in chasing the assassin.

“Li... Milady Lina!? Why are you here...?” Carlson asked in a flustered voice. Without answering, *tsukatsukatsuka!* I walked into the room.

“Milady Lina...?” At my demeanor, Mr. Frank knit his brows. A faint bloodlust appeared behind me.

“**Damu Brass!**”

Doga!

“Guaa!”

Turning around, I fired one shot of the spell. The door shattered, and a scream rose. Beyond the shattered door was a man, completely in black clothes, who had taken my spell and was out cold. The same assassin who had vanished from the window earlier.

“...As I thought... you came to this room...”

“What does this mean!? Milady Lina!?” Frank asked.

“Neither this nor that. If you think about it well, the answer comes rather easily.”

“The answer?” This time Mr. Carlson asked back.

“Yes. The day after the first assassin—Mari—was captured, a second assassin showed up, and initially the room she was confined in was exploded. This kind of thing wouldn't happen by chance. That means the opponent knew she had been captured, and which room she was captured in.”

“You mean there is a traitor!?” Frank asked with a stunned expression. I shook my head left and right, "No," and said:

“No. Probably, not a traitor, but the mastermind himself is likely here. Inside the mansion.”

“Foolishness!”

“The mastermind is? In this mansion?”

Spoke Mr. Carlson and Mr. Frank, almost at the same time.

At those two, I fixed my gaze and continued:

“—You two went out to work today, did you not? The assassin Mari had been captured, and the situation had calmed down. Now it's safe for a while. Even if you jointly manage the business, that doesn't mean you are stuck together twenty-four seven, so there must have been times when you acted separately. And when you were acting separately, you don't know exactly what the other one was doing.”

“You can’t be serious!?”

“Wa... wait a minute! Then it’s almost as if...!” Frank began.

Damu!

Interrupting Mr. Frank's words, the room's window suddenly opened. Sliding in from there into the room was a man completely in black clothes! There was another one!? Before I could take action, the assassin pulled a knife from his pocket and threw it!

However!

Gin!

Charincharin.

The throwing knife the assassin had released was knocked down by a knife that flew in from another direction.

“What!?” A voice of surprise rose from the assassin. Dropping down before his eyes was a black shadow.

As I thought, he showed up in this kind of situation! Gizan!

Behind the recoiling assassin one more person dropped down.

“—!”

The assassin drew a short sword from his pocket and cut toward the opponent behind him in a turn. But the opponent in that interval had moved around and was once again taking the back of the assassin. The short sword merely swept vainly through the air.

Tonk.

Receiving a sword hand strike to the back of the neck, the assassin collapsed easily.

“...You probably forgot, but—I’m a professional too.” Saying that, Mari flipped her hair with a *whosh*

“Are you... safe!?” Carlson asked. I wear a small smile and reply:

“Probably, before the explosives were thrown into the room, Gizan realized it and escaped with Mari. And then, hid in the attic here and was watching things—that’s about how it is, isn't it?”

At my words, Gizan gave a silent small nod.

“Well, both the assassins and the mastermind underestimated Gizan too much. Right, Mr. Carlson?”

“T...truly...” Mr. Carlson replied with a voice containing fright.

...*Haaa*...

At his reply, I let out a small sigh and continued:

“...What kind of oblivious nonsense are you saying? The mastermind is none other than Mr. Carlson yourself, that's what I'm saying.”

“““***...What!?***”””

A chorus of stunned voices rose from everyone excluding Mari.

“—No... Milady Lina, what are you suddenly saying...?” After a brief silence, Mr. Carlson finally opened his mouth. “The way you were speaking just now, it was as if you were saying Frank was the mastermind... and yet, suddenly I am the mastermind...? In the first place, I’m the one whose life was being targeted.”

“—True. I did think about the Mr. Frank mastermind theory for a moment. If the business is jointly managed, if Mr. Carlson were to be gone, all the concessions and fortune would be Mr. Frank’s alone. —But on the other hand, if Mr. Frank were to be gone, it would be Mr. Carlson's alone.”

“That’s why! I’m the one who was being targeted, wasn’t I!?”

“No. That’s wrong.” I shook my head left and right and continued:

“True, in the notice, it was written that your life would be taken, Mr. Carlson. But, the one really being targeted was Mr. Frank.

The knife that assassin threw just now was also aimed at Mr. Frank. Not at Carlson.

—In the first place, why on earth would an assassin need to send a notice? The answer is simple. He wants us to think the one being targeted is Mr. Carlson. But in reality, Mr. Frank was being targeted. Even if Mr. Frank were to be killed, everyone would probably think: Mr. Frank was mistaken for his brother, Mr. Carlson, and killed.”

“...W...what grounds do you have for saying that...!?” Face turning red with anger, Mr. Carlson shouted.

“...Your poor graceful acceptance of defeat is annoying...

Just now, one of the assassins entered Mr. Frank’s room. —Probably Mr. Frank woke up at the first explosion and went to check on Mr. Carlson. The assassins knew which room Mari was confined in. If they know the interior well, they shouldn't mistakenly go to Mr. Frank's room. The story that Mr. Frank is actually the mastermind and was planning to meet with the assassins is out. If that was the case, there's no way Mr. Frank would have left the room.”

“...T...that’s why but...”

“The idea was good, but what was different from the calculation was that Mari, as an assassin, was a bit… uhm… that... that's what she was.”

“...What is it...? That 'that' part...?” Mari's murmur was for the moment ignored.

“And further, Gizan's appearance. Different from the calculation, Mari was captured quite easily. Alive, too.

The one who opposed torture when Mari was captured, the one who opposed handing her over to the officials, it was all you, Mr. Carlson. And also you, going to work with some strange excuse despite your life being targeted.

To ‘dispose’ of Mari before she, knowing the mastermind's true identity, spoke of it, there was no other way. When you acted separately from Mr. Frank, I don't know where or how you did it, but you procured two other assassins and had them attack the mansion—

—Right? Mari?”

At my question, she lightly shrugged her shoulders and replied:

“...Well... there's no reason for me to be loyal to a client who’d toss explosives into my room, anyway.”

“—Tch!” Simultaneous with the word, Mr. Carlson bolted towards the door—towards

me! Is he planning to escape!? But before I could move—

Gon.

Taking a vase thrown by Mr. Frank directly to the back of the head, Mr. Carlson collapsed out cold onto the floor.

“...It was a rather hollow incident, wasn't it...”

“DON'T YOU SAY THAT!!!”

Zugosh!

Muttering to herself EXTERIORLY as she gazed EXTERIORLY at nothing, me and Gizan’s double kick exploded on the back of Mari’s head and face.

“Consider yourself lucky you're not being handed over to the officials. Once we return to the village, consider yourself under lifelong surveillance, cleaning toilets.”

“Aaaaaaaaaa. Maybe I should have been handed over to the officials.” At Gizan's words, Mari began to tear up.

It was the afternoon of the day after the attack—after handing Mr. Carlson over to the officials. Of course, Mari was also a substantial accomplice, but thanks to Mr. Frank listening to Gizan's wish to keep her involvement a secret, the matter was settled by her being placed in Gizan's custody.

“We go. Come Gizarmet.”

“...Uwaaah...sob sob...”

“...We were indebted to you as well,” It was Mr. Frank who spoke to me as I gazed EXTERIORLY at the backs of the two departing figures. “This is just a token of our gratitude. Please accept it.”

“Then—without hesitation,” I received the small leather bag offered with my right hand—and involuntarily knit my brows. ...Light... It was far too light to be money. I loosened the drawstring of the bag and peered inside. There were only some blackish, dried-up things packed tightly.

“...Umm... what is this...?”

“Dried goods.”

“.....”

“The liver of a Molmol rabbit, dried. It's a local specialty from this area.”

“...uh... well… I don’t want this kind of thing but... the request fee…?”

“The one who hired you as a guard was my brother, right?”

……

Noooooooooooo! So that’s how it issssssss!?

“Wai... wait a second! That...!”

“I told you. It’s just a token of gratitude. —In the first place, doing something beyond what was contracted is something a merchant mustn’t do.”

“Th... that is certainly true, but that...”

“Well. So that’s how it is. We were indebted to you.” Saying that one-sidedly, Mr. Frank turned on his heel and walked off with brisk strides.

Behind him, I was left alone, just standing EXTERIORLY there. With the leather bag filled with dried goods still clenched in my hand.

...As I thought... maybe I shouldn't have saved him...

(Night of the Assassins: End)

Afterword

Author: Hello! And with that, I present to you *Slayers Special* Volume 9: "Iris's Journey"!

L: Noaaaahhhhhh—!?

Author: From this story onward, *Slayers Special* was split into two-part chapters for its serialization in *Dragon Magazine*. Since I mentioned in the Volume 8 afterword that the "single-episode format ends here," some people mistakenly thought the series itself was ending...

But it's nothing like that. It just switched to a "two-part format" and is stubbornly continuing.

L: Wonudoaaaaaaa—!?

Author: Up until now, chapters were collected in the order they appeared in the magazine. However, as you can see from the original publication dates, the third story here, "Unjust Accusation Without Reason," was actually published much later in *Dramaga*. The reason it was moved up for this volume is because in Main Series Volume 10...

L: Kurohemooooooo—!?

Author: ...Gah! What is with you?! You've been doing nothing but screaming your head off for a while now!

L: What do you mean "what is with me"?! It's this! This! This year's 1996 New Year's card!

Author: ...Ah, you mean the one I promised in the *Solaria* afterword? The "Hajime Kanzaka original, for L-sama's eyes only..." no, "The Teenage Version L-sama, who looks quite clever at a glance, and Subordinate S" thing?

L: I appreciate that you lacked the spine to finish that sentence and corrected yourself out of fear of me.

Anyway, that card! I don't care about me in the foreground—what is with the person in the back?!

Author: What... you mean... Subordinate S... (The Demon King of the North, Human Version).

L: Noooooooo! I hate that Subordinate S looks so normal and dignified! It's a lie! I'm going to sue you through the JARO (Japan Advertising Review Organization)!

Author: Don't sue me! Who cares? It's fine if he looks normal.

L: Absolutely not! Since he played the snowman in '95, I was certain he'd be the decorative shrimp on top of the New Year's rice cake this year!

Author: ...Well, granted... his design in the TV version did have a certain "shrimp and crab" flair to it...

Whatever, it's fine. What's done is done.

L: Well... I guess so...

Oh, right. Speaking of TV, it's been decided we're doing it again this year. The TV series and a movie.

Author: Yup. It's truly a joyous thing to be revived!

L: Hmm. This is entirely thanks to me! I definitely need to make an appearance this time!

Author: Like I said, it's not happening. That's just how it is.

L: What?! Why?! Ha! Could this be a conspiracy by the Freemasons?!

Author: You think you can beat an organization with a 5,000 yen annual membership fee? And you call yourself a Demon King.

Well, besides the TV and movie, we've also got the radio drama being released on CD and the start of the OVA. There's a lot going on this year.

L: But really, *Slayers* has grown so big, hasn't it?

Author: It really has.

Oh, that reminds me! One benchmark for becoming "mainstream" is the appearance of "imposters"...

And apparently, one has finally appeared! A Hajime Kanzaka imposter! Hehe! We made it!

L: ...Are you... happy about this...?

Author: Just a little.

L: I see...

And then this "self-proclaimed Hajime Kanzaka" will go around hitting on female fans, and years later, girls will show up at the editorial office saying, "I had Hajime Kanzaka's baby, please recognize it."

Author: ...Actually... I might hate that...

Hmm... personally, I was hoping for a scenario where I happen to walk into a cafe and find the "self-proclaimed Hajime Kanzaka" sitting there acting all high and mighty, and I could pretend to be a fan and grill him with relentless questions...

L: ...You... you really have bad taste...

Author: As long as they aren't causing trouble for others, I think it'd be interesting to have a dozen or two imposters running around...

Anyway, for those looking for the real deal: the real one lives in Osaka Prefecture (as of 1996) and likes cats.

If someone introduces themselves as "Hajime Kanzaka" without even being asked, you can bet your life they're a fake.

L: Without being asked...

So, if someone *does* ask, do you answer "I'm Hajime Kanzaka"?

Author: ...Urk... I might...

But if you want absolute proof of identity, the one thing that's unmistakable is "being able to doodle L." ...Though... if the person meeting the self-proclaimed Hajime Kanzaka doesn't know my doodling style, it's meaningless...

L: Signatures are easy, so anyone can copy those.

Not many pen strokes, after all.

But really, is it even fun to impersonate someone like you...?

Author: I mean... I assume they do it because it's fun... though I don't know *how* it's fun...

Well, anyway.

Let's leave it at that for now...

L: Wait just a minute!

Before we finish, what happened to the ideas for the popularity poll method you were scouting for in the *Solaria* afterword?

Author: Oh, that.

We got a lot of suggestions, but none of them were quite right...

A common one was "Submit a drawing of your favorite character. If the drawing is good, it gets high points; if not, low points."

L: That's... basically saying people who can't draw aren't allowed to vote...

Author: Yeah. Some suggested a 5-point scale based on how good the art is, and then totaling those...

L: Tallying that would be a nightmare...

Author: Another popular one was assigning a color to every character, dividing a

postcard into five sections, and having fans color in the sections for the characters they want to vote for (one section equals one point).

The tallying method involved cutting the postcards into sections...

L: ...Hey now...

Author: And counting the resulting slips. But the sheer work involved in cutting and sorting incoming postcards...

If we're going that route, I feel like the "allocate 5 points and a minus point" method we used for the 2nd poll is still easier to tally...

L: Heh! If it comes to that, you should just stop writing and tally the postcards yourself!

Author: ...No... I feel like that would be putting the cart before the horse...

But at this rate, I almost feel like it'd be better to just use the method from the *Bezeld* afterword...

L: So, are we going with that?

Author: No, wait. I'll wait a bit longer. If no good ideas come in, I'll either think of something random myself or... just not do it...

L: "Not doing it" is rejected! We're definitely doing a 3rd popularity poll, and this time, I'm going to soar into a magnificent 1st place!

Author: Honestly... 1st place is probably impossible...

L: Shut up!

Anyway, that's the deal! We're waiting for a voting method idea that will make the author go, "Whoa! Why didn't I think of that?!"

Author: And with that, let's wrap it up for real this time.

L: See you again!

Afterword: End